EXCLUSIVE Q&A

Ben Collins

THE VOICE OF BRITISH MOTORSPORT

MOTORSPORT NEWS

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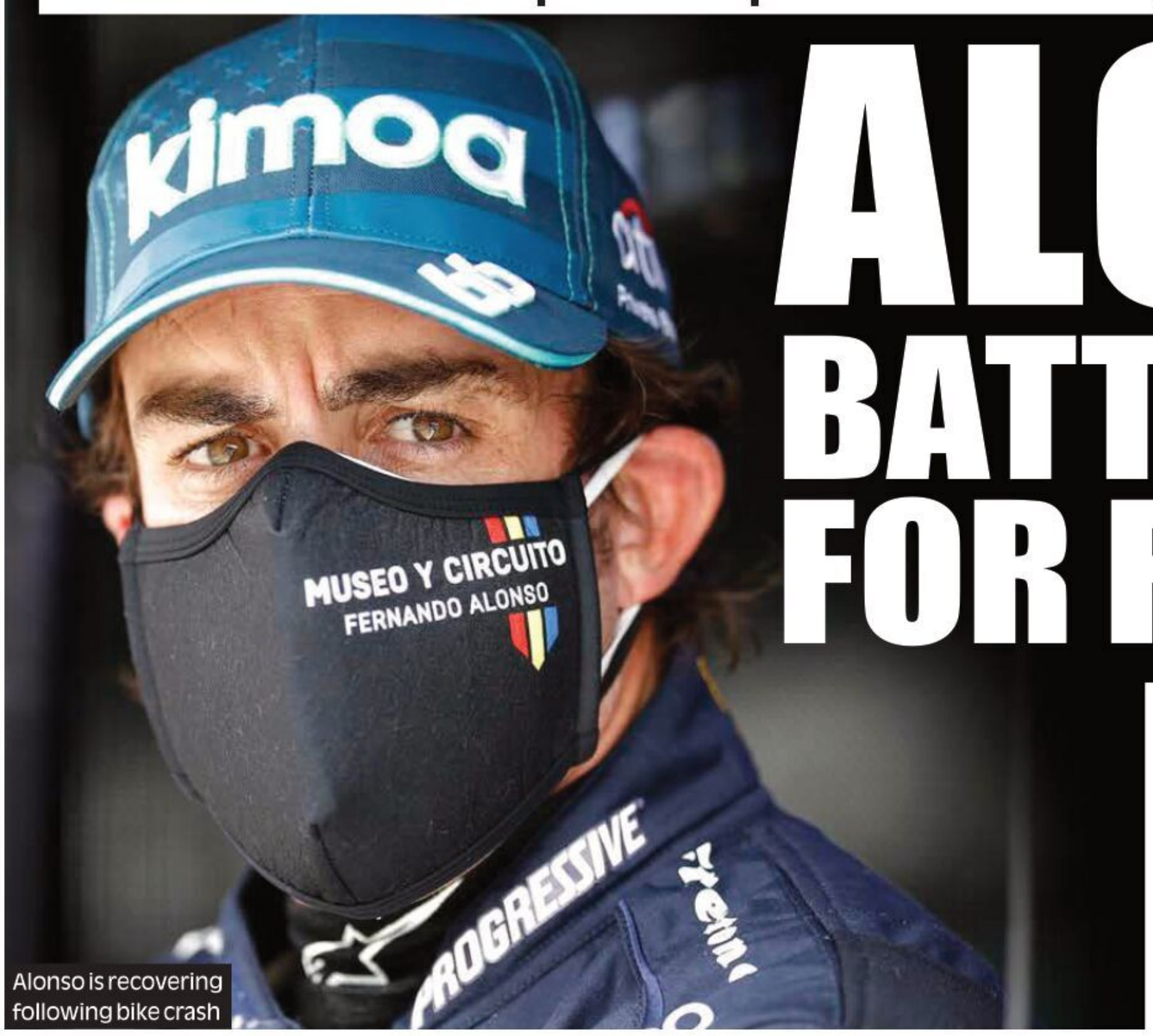
TV's Stig speaks to MN about his motor racing career P14

Two-time World champion has operation on broken jaw after cycling accident in Switzerland

ALONSO'S BATTLE TO BE FIT FOR F1 RETURN



Alonso is recovering following bike crash

By Matt James

Bosses of the Alpine Formula 1 team expect the returning Fernando Alonso to be ready to take his place on the grid for the opening grand prix of the season in Bahrain despite breaking his jaw in a cycling accident last week.

The Spaniard was in collision with a car while he was out training in Lugano, Switzerland on Thursday last week. The 39-year-old, who lives in the town, underwent a "corrective" operation on Friday which was described as a success.

A statement from the Alpine team, which raced as Renault in 2020, said: "The medical team are satisfied with his progress. After a few days of complete rest, he will be able to progressively resume training. We expect him to be fully operational to [prepare] for the season."

Pre-season testing for the 2021 F1 season is due to take place in Bahrain on March 12-14, while the opening grand prix of the year is scheduled to take place at the same venue on March 28.

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COMMENT

Photo: Motorsport Images, Jakob Ebrey

If ever there was an example of why Lewis's talent is so highly prized, it was Turkey, 2020

WHY HAMILTON IS READY TO GO

The on-off saga of Lewis Hamilton's protracted contract negotiations has finally come to an end as the seven-time Formula 1 world-beater has committed his future – in the short term at least – to the Mercedes team.

There was no brinksmanship as has been reported elsewhere, and there wasn't any real question of Hamilton not renewing his deal. The only option left to him, with the lack of top-line drives available elsewhere, would have been to take a sabbatical. That was highly unlikely and it would also be hard to see how motivated the Briton would be to come back to the pressure-cooker environment of grand prix racing after 12 months away. He wasn't going to turn his back on the opportunity to become the most successful driver of all time in terms of titles won.

He has no right to a world title and he will pitch into battle again against Red Bull and Ferrari *et al* as he chases that momentous crown. His desire to win has never been stronger.

It was almost lost in the glitz and celebrations of his seventh world crown in Turkey last year, but his performance in Istanbul surely has to go down as one of the greatest grand prix drives of all time. If there was ever a race that threw everything at the competitors, it was there. Rain, the porous new surface, the perfectly judged application of throttle on the ice-rink like Tarmac and the on-the-money strategy calls from both the driver and the team were at their sublime best.

The hunger to win runs deep – but for how much longer? Mercedes Formula 1 head Toto Wolff says that while Hamilton is more than capable of racing on into 2022 and beyond, there is no pressure from either side and no firm commitment at this stage. Amen to that, and Hamilton has earned the right to stop when he wants.

In MN this week, our Q&A incumbent is Ben Collins. He was an up-and-coming racer in the late-1990s who, like so many of his adversaries, never quite got the breaks he needed. He branched out and ended up becoming *Top Gear*'s Stig – a role that made him famous, even though his identity was hidden. He reflects on his career.

Graham Keilloh looks at the history of the Rockingham track in Northamptonshire which, 20 years ago, achieved the seemingly impossible by bring the jaw-dropping oval speeds of Champ Cars to these shores. We also investigate the ambitious Excelr8 British Touring Car Championship programme. Also, Luke Barry tells us what we missed in UK rallying due to the 2020 lockdown that decimated the discipline.

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MOTORSPORT NEWS

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RACING NEWS

IN BRIEF

Portimao is in
Formula 1 bosses have reportedly reached an agreement with authorities in Portugal to allow Portimao to maintain its place on the 2021 calendar. There was doubt cast over the race, which is due to be the third grand prix of the season, due to the escalating coronavirus situation in the country. However, it is now likely that the race will take up its date on May 2. Meanwhile, TV figures from 2020 show that the Hungarian GP, which was won by Lewis Hamilton, was the most watched race of the season.

Wraps off Ferrari
Ferrari has fired up its new-for-2021 F1 challenger, the SF21, and has announced two launch dates for the machine. The car, which will be driven by Charles Leclerc and Carlos Sainz, will be revealed to the team and its members on February 26, before a reveal to the world at large on March 10.

Peugeot line-up
Peugeot has named its drivers for its return to sportscar racing, planned in 2022, in the new Le Mans Hypercar class in the World Endurance Championship. They are headlined by Formula 1 refugee Kevin Magnussen. He is joined by Paul di Resta, Jean-Eric Vergne, Loic Duval, Gustavo Menezes and Mikkel Jensen. Former Honda F1 tester James Rossiter is due to be the squad's test and reserve driver .

A roof for Ilott
Ferrari F1 tester Callum Ilott will race in a yet-to-be revealed programme in the Italian firm's GT cars in 2021. Ferrari has said that the Briton would be "on the scene and present" at a number of grands prix this year but would focus on a sportscar programme. The 2020 Formula 2 runner up had already confirmed that he would not be returning to the single-seater category for a fresh assault.

Dumbreck's hiatus
Scottish ace Peter Dumbreck has decided to stand down from the racing side of the Falken Motorsport team, a squad he has taken part in 14 consecutive Nurburgring 24 Hours races with. The 47-year-old will remain with the crew in a consultation role and insists he hasn't retired from racing just yet.

Christmas for Carroll
A1GP champion Adam Carroll has been signed by the NIO 333 Formula E team as its test and reserve driver for 2021. The Northern Irishman, who has recently confirmed a programme in the GT Cup in the UK for this season, previously competed in Formula E with Jaguar in 2016-2017 season.

ALONSO'S SURGERY FOLLOWING BIKE CRASH DURING TRAINING

Road spill puts Spaniard in hospital with operation on broken jaw

Photos: Motorsport Images

Alonso was struck on his cycle

By Matt James

Fernando Alonso could be forced to miss pre-season testing for the second time in his career after a cycling accident while training last week.

The 39-year-old, who is due to make his grand prix comeback this term with the rebranded Alpine team (formerly Renault), was in collision with a road car near his home in Lugano in Switzerland last Thursday.

He was taken to hospital and underwent an operation on a broken jaw. This year's pre-season Formula 1 testing will take place in Bahrain on March 12-14, just under two weeks before the opening race of the season in the same country.

Alonso, a 32-time grand prix winner, was also forced to sit out the opening round of the 2015 season in Australia after a testing accident with McLaren left him with concussion.

Alonso was attended by police officers and paramedics after his bike accident last week, and they issued a statement which confirmed they are investigating the cause of the crash.

The statement said: "While [the driver was] making a left turn manoeuvre to enter a supermarket parking lot, there was a collision with a 39-year-old Spanish citizen, who was riding his bicycle and passing the column of stationary vehicles in the opposite direction on the right. The collision occurred against the right-hand side of the car."

A statement from the Alpine team said that the 2005 and 2006 World champion was expected to be fit enough to continue his preparations for the 2021 competition after he had recuperated.

It said: "The medical team are satisfied with his progress. "After a few days of complete rest, he will be able to progressively resume training. We expect him to be fully operational to [prepare] for the season."

Lewis and Roscoe return

Hamilton signs on for one more year with Mercedes

Lewis Hamilton has signed a one-year extension to his Mercedes contract that means he will race for the team as he chases a record-breaking eighth crown.

As well as his on-track deal, Mercedes has committed to upping its efforts for "greater diversity and inclusion in motorsport" and will create a new joint charitable foundation with Hamilton to support the initiative.

The British driver, who broke the record for the most individual wins in 2020 and has 95 victories, said: "We look forward to building on our success even further, while continuously looking to improve, both on and off the track. I'm proud to say we are taking that effort further this year by launching a foundation dedicated to diversity and inclusion in the sport.

"I am inspired by all that we can build together."

Team boss Toto Wolff said that the lateness of the talks and the single-season deal did not prevent the two parties signing an extended agreement. He said: "It was just we felt that we had a good signature on a 2021 contract and we needed to get going and then find some time in 2021 earlier than this time to discuss the future."

THREE FORMULA 1 SPRINT RACES FOR THIS SEASON

Team chiefs has given a provisional thumbs up to the plan to hold shorter sprint races at three grands prix in the 2021 season.

The 100-kilometre long Saturday events are earmarked for Canada, Italy and Brazil. The results of the sprint race would set the grid for the weekend's main race on Sunday, and the grid for the shorter event would be set by moving qualifying forward to Friday.

A statement from governing body the FIA said: "All teams recognised the major importance of engaging fans in new and innovative ways to ensure an even more exciting weekend format.

"There was broad support from all parties for a new qualifying format at some races, and a working group has been tasked with creating a plan with the aim to reach a final decision before the start for the 2021 championship."

There are still details of the plan that need to be nailed down. It has not been decided how many points would be on offer for the sprint races, and teams are aiming to iron out any financial implications that it might involve.

Monza is a venue for a planned sprint F1 clash

JELLEY MAKES WSR RETURN FOR 2021 BTCC

Race winner Stephen Jelley will rejoin the WSR British Touring Car Championship team for the 2021 season, completing the title-winning squad's three-car line-up.

Jelley, who has raced for the Team Parker Racing outfit since rejoining the championship four years ago, will drive a BMW 330i M Sport. The Leicester man raced for WSR in the 2008 and 2009 season and took two wins.

He took a BTCC sabbatical from 2009 until 2016. He has since added another career triumph in the Parker BMW 125i M Sport in 2019.

Jelley, 38, said: "When I walked into the workshop for the first time in over a decade, the first thing that I noticed was just how many more trophies there are on the shelves, and that's inspiring. I've spent a few years in a WSR-built BMW 1 Series, so there won't be an issue adapting to the 330i M Sport."

Jelley will join WSR's returning drivers, four-time title winner Colin Turkington and Tom Oliphant, in the new campaign.

Team boss Dick Bennetts added:

Jelley will rejoin the WSR fold

"[Stephen's] performances in the WSR-built 1 Series over the past couple of years have shown that he remains a tenacious racer who performs best in rear-wheel-drive cars. Personality-wise, he fits in very well with the whole team as well as Colin and Tom so we're very pleased with the strength of our line-up heading into the new season."

BTCC 2021 LINE-UP

Who goes where?

DRIVER	TEAM	CAR	LICENCE HOLDER
Ash Sutton	Laser Tools Racing	Infiniti Q50	BMR Racing
Aiden Moffat	Laser Tools Racing	Infiniti Q50	Aiden Moffat Racing
Carl Boardley	Laser Tools Racing	Infiniti Q50	Boardley Motorsport
TBA	Team Hard	Cupra Leon R	Boardley Motorsport
Jack Goff	Team Hard	Cupra Leon R	Team Hard
Glynn Geddie	Team Hard	Cupra Leon R	Team Hard
Aron Taylor-Smith	Team Hard	Cupra Leon R	Team Hard
Josh Cook	BTC Racing	Honda Civic Type R	BTC Racing
Michael Crees	BTC Racing	Honda Civic Type R	BTC Racing
Jade Edwards	BTC Racing	Honda Civic Type R	BTC Racing
Adam Morgan	Ciceley Motorsport	BMW 330i M Sport	Ciceley Motorsport
Tom Chilton	Ciceley Motorsport	BMW 330i M Sport	Ciceley Motorsport
Tom Ingram	Excelr8 Trade Price Cars Racing	Hyundai i30	Excelr8 Motorsport
Chris Smiley	Excelr8 Trade Price Cars Racing	Hyundai i30	Excelr8 Motorsport
Sam Osborne	Motorbase Performance	Ford Focus	Motorbase Performance
Andy Neate	Motorbase Performance	Ford Focus	Motorbase Performance
Jake Hill	MB Motorsport	Ford Focus	Motorbase Performance
Ollie Jackson	MB Motorsport	Ford Focus	Motorbase Performance
Jason Plato	Power Maxed Racing	Vauxhall Astra	Power Maxed Racing
TBA	Power Maxed Racing	Vauxhall Astra	Power Maxed Racing
Rory Butcher	Speedworks Motorsport	Toyota Corolla	Speedworks Motorsport
Sam Smelt	Speedworks Motorsport	Toyota Corolla	Speedworks Motorsport
Dan Cammish	Team Dynamics	Honda Civic Type R	Team Dynamics
TBA	Team Dynamics	Honda Civic Type R	Team Dynamics
Jack Butel	Excelr8 Trade Price Cars Racing	Hyundai i30	Trade Price Cars Racing
TBA	Excelr8 Trade Price Cars Racing	Hyundai i30	Trade Price Cars Racing
Colin Turkington	WSR	BMW 330i M Sport	WSR
Tom Oliphant	WSR	BMW 330i M Sport	WSR
Stephen Jelley	WSR	BMW 330i M Sport	WSR

Rules could help Red Bull team

Engine freeze from 2022 as Formula 1 looks ahead to new 'powerful and emotive' hybrid motor

Formula 1 team bosses have decided to suspend engine developments from the start of 2022 as powerplant manufacturers embrace a new design, which is due to be implemented in 2025.

It means that teams will be locked in to the performance of their powerplants from the beginning of 2022 and no measures to equalise the output of the motors will be made. The development axe is a boost to Red Bull's desire to take over the Honda programme and use the departing Japanese firm's unit over the next few seasons.

The engine freeze will allow boffins to focus on the upcoming powerplants. The new units will feature hybrid systems, and the rulemakers have set out a list of objectives for the motors. They include a sustainable fuel, significant cost reductions and it says that the power units must be "powerful and emotive".

Giddings (l) and Whitmore unite

Photo: Ciceley Motorsport, Jakob Ebrey

The Mercedes returns to British GT4 with the Ciceley move

CHAMPION GIDDINGS LEADS BTCC TEAM CICELEY'S NEW BRITISH GT ATTACK

BTCC race-winning squad confirms British GT expansion with Pro-Am pair Giddings and Whitmore

By Graham Keilloh

Ciceley Motorsport has confirmed its entry into this year's British GT championship, with 2014 champion Jake Giddings joining Dave Whitmore in a Mercedes GT4.

Race-winning British Touring Car Championship team Ciceley previously competed with a Mercedes GT4 in 2018's Donington Park British GT season-closer. Its 2021 entry means Mercedes returns to British GT4 racing after a year's absence.

Giddings took his British GT4 crown in a Beechdean Aston Martin, and has driven for Ciceley on numerous occasions including in the Dubai 24 Hours.

Amateur driver Whitmore took part in three British GT races in 2020 in a Century Motorsport BMW M4 and has raced in Club Enduro, the M3 Cup and the Gulf 12 Hours. The Pro-Am partnership also recently got shakedown mileage in the car with Ciceley at Oulton Park in sub-zero temperatures.

Ciceley's commercial director Norman Burgess said: "It [British GT] is something we have wanted to do for a few years. We have a great driver pairing, Jake is a previous champion and Dave is like a sponge, soaking up all the information he can and is already turning heads with his speed and consistency.

"The core of the team gives us a great starting point with Nick Hancox as team engineer, Dave Hudson number one mechanic and [Ciceley BTCC driver] Adam Morgan will be assisting both drivers with data and video interpretation."

Ciceley in the BTCC this year ends its long-time use of the Mercedes A-Class and will instead run BMW 330i M Sport machines.

TF Sport's Aston Martin GTE moves into ELMS this year

TF RETURNS TO ELMS WITH FACTORY DRIVER GUNN

TF Sport is returning to the European Le Mans Series this season with an LMGTE class Aston Martin Vantage GTE driven by Ross Gunn, John Hartshorne and Ollie Hancock.

Multiple GT championship-winner TF last raced in the ELMS in 2017 with the previous V8 Vantage GTE, and missed out on the title by just two points.

Hartshorne and Hancock are also competing for TF in the Asian Le Mans Series this year, and are joined in the ELMS line-up by Aston factory driver Gunn.

TF's GTE will share a garage with the 'Racing Team Turkey by TF Sport' LMP2, making it the first time the team has run in multiple classes in an international championship.

Team owner Tom Ferrier said: "We were so close to winning the championship last time, our only aim is to go back and seal the deal… in both classes! It's certainly going to be a challenge, but it is one I believe we are more than capable of taking on. After racing against Ross in WEC last season, I'm glad he's able to join us."

MONGER IN RED NOSE DAY 140-MILE 'TRIATHLON' CHALLENGE

Billy Monger is raising money for Comic Relief with a four-day 140-mile triathlon-inspired challenge involving walking, kayaking and cycling.

The funds raised will support life-changing projects including tackling mental health stigma and domestic abuse, and helping children plus those hit by the coronavirus pandemic.

An hour-long documentary following Monger's journey will also be broadcast next month on BBC One.

Monger had both legs amputated after a Formula 4 Donington Park crash in 2017, and has since competed in Euroformula Open and BRDC Formula 3.

Monger said: "I've never done anything like this before. I've not done cycling since my accident, never kayaked before. Doubts start to creep in, you're like 'maybe I've bitten off more than I can chew here?'

"[I was] helped in my recovery by a lot of people. I can hopefully give something back to some people."

You can find out more about Monger's effort, and donate, at: comicrelief.com/rednoseday/challenges/billy/.

Monger: helping others

NEW ONE-MAKE AUDI TT CATEGORY

Track Attack Race Club has unveiled TT Challenge, a new Audi TT Coupe category to be a Deutsche Marques Cup class in 2021 and its own series in '22.

Like the club's other one-make series it aims to keep cars near production spec and therefore affordable. Donor cars could be bought for £1500 and a turn-key car for £5000.

Track Attack boss Steve Vince said: "Many of our series have been going for some time, and maybe have lost some motivation. As well as rejuvenating what we already have we want to widen the club's appeal by adding to the options to race."

Audi TT gets own series

GINETTA JUNIOR FIELD GROWS TO 24 ENTRIES

The 2021 Ginetta Junior field continues to swell with Assetto Motorsport adding a fourth driver with the returning Jamie Osborne, brother of BTCC driver Sam.

Jamie competed in the contest for 14-to-17-year-olds in 2018 with WDE Motorsport. Two-time Ginetta G40 Cup title-winning team Assetto made its Junior debut last season with Joe Wheeler driving. Assetto confirmed last month that Wheeler is returning alongside new rookie team-mates Maxwell Dodds and Harri Reynolds. Osborne brings this Ginetta Junior campaign's total of announced drivers to 24.

Team boss Jim Edwards said: "I have known the Osborne family for a few years, as Sam was a Clio Cup regular and team-mate to my daughter Jade. I always kept an eye on Jamie's progress. I'm delighted to bring him into our team."

IN BRIEF

Cadwell recovery

Lincolnshire Police has confirmed that Cadwell Park's stolen BMW X5 medical car has been recovered. Three men aged 30, 34 and 50 have been arrested and released under investigation while inquiries continue in connection with the X5 and BMW M240i safety car being stolen from the track last month. The safety car has not yet been found.

Lebbon to BRDC F3

Reigning Ginetta Junior champion Tom Lebbon is looking to learn from graduating to the BRDC British Formula 3 championship this year. Lebbon, the first rookie to win the Ginetta Junior title, will in F3 race with the same Elite Motorsport team with which he secured his crown. The 15-year-old said: "I need to adapt to slick tyres and aero which is all new to me."

Granfors: Swedish star

Granfors for Fortec

Double title-winner Joel Granfors has become the first 2021 British Formula 4 driver signing for Fortec Motorsport, the team that took Luke Browning to 2020's title. Fifteen-year-old Granfors claimed Scandinavia's Formula Nordic title for 1.6-litre Formula Renault cars last year despite missing the first meeting due to being too young, and the Swede also dominated the entry-level Aquila Synergy Cup.

Harrison's Carrera Cup

Reigning Mini Challenge champion Nathan Harrison will race in Porsche Carrera Cup GB this year with Team Hard. Harrison had been seeking a British Touring Car Championship switch and tested with Excelr8 Motorsport before Christmas. "We knew that the continuing impact of Covid meant that we might struggle to raise the budget [for BTCC]," Harrison said. "We couldn't rely on late promises."

Turner to VW Cup

Fiesta Junior champion Olly Turner will race a JM-Racing Mk7 Golf in 2021's Volkswagen Racing Cup. The 18-year-old also finished third in 2020's senior Fiesta championship. The team, which aims to run up to three cars this year, said: "It was a no-brainer! We were looking for a young driver who has the ability to win the championship and we feel have this with Olly."

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RACING NEWS

Venues proved to be ineligible

Photo: Jakob Ebrey, SCCA Pro Racing, Force Indy,

Announced government support more geared to those directly facing bankruptcy

UK MOTORSPORT "FRUSTRATED" AS GOVERNMENT CASH FALLS THROUGH

"Severely impacted" UK circuits prove ineligible for UK government's announced £6m loan Covid help

By Graham Keilloh

UK motorsport figures have expressed frustration after circuits proved ineligible for the government's Covid support cash announced last November.

The UK government's package included £6 million earmarked for circuit operators, but it transpired to be a loan of last resort more geared to football and rugby clubs fulfilling ongoing fixture obligations.

Motorsport UK CEO Hugh Chambers told Motorsport News: "The whole exercise has been somewhat frustrating because there was a big headline made. The announcement preceded any real analysis of the qualification to receive that support.

"As the government fine-tuned their approach, it [was] designed for sports organisations that have run out of any other options and are staring bankruptcy in the face.

"The venue operators broadly are severely impacted, it's going to take many years to recover their balance sheets, but they are not at the very limit of options.

"It's frustrating because the [motorsport] community looked at it and thought the circuit owners are going to have that lifeline but it's a bit harder than it appears."

Ben Taylor, group CEO of the British Automobile Racing Club that runs several circuits, told MN: "I'd be very surprised if any of them [circuit operators] are going to be in a position to utilise it. The government made a big show of it and nothing has come to pass. But it's much better that motorsport was on that list rather than not."

UK RACERS "ITCHING" TO COMPETE DESPITE DIFFICULT TIMES

Chambers notes fervour

Motorsport UK CEO Hugh Chambers has told Motorsport News that the country's enthusiasm for competition is undimmed by the latest lockdown and ongoing Covid impact.

He told MN: "Things are looking promising. Members are showing a great deal of confidence that things are going to restart before too long and we are going to get competition this year so they're actively renewing their licences, which is fantastic.

"There's a very large body of licence holders that are itching to get out there.

"Given everything that's happened, motorsport in the UK has so far broadly weathered the storm pretty well, as long as we do have a resumption in the next two or three months I'm confident that things will rebound. I recognise [though] the long-term impact has been on a lot of individuals and engineering firms; the motorsport infrastructure has been impacted."

US RISING STAR ESTERSON GETS FF1600 CAMPAIGN

Young American Max Esterson will race in this year's National Formula Ford 1600 championship and other events with Low Dempsey Racing.

The 18-year-old competed with the team in last year's FF1600 showpieces, finishing sixth in the Festival and 14th in the Walter Hayes Trophy, in LDR's debut campaign as successor to decorated Cliff Dempsey Racing.

Esports and karting graduate Esterson was a regular frontrunner in 2020's US F1600 series.

Esterson said: "Racing Formula Fords in the UK will be a blast as well as a great learning experience. [We'll] hopefully fight for the title."

Esterson back for more

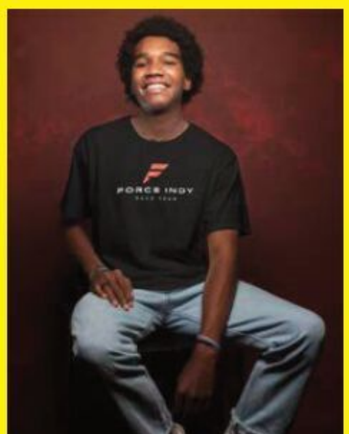
NEW PENSKE-MENTORED AFRICAN AMERICAN TEAM CONFIRMS DRIVER

African American-run Force Indy has confirmed Myles Rowe as its driver for its inaugural 2021 campaign in USF2000, the first rung on America's 'Road to Indy'.

Penske-mentored Force Indy was launched late last year and is created specifically to hire and develop diverse drivers and staff as part of IndyCar's new 'Race for Equality & Change' initiative.

Rowe took a Skip Barber Racing School Formula Ford to the Lucas Oil Racing School Summer Series championship in 2017. He also tested a USF2000 car at Indianapolis last July as part of Race for Equality & Change.

Rowe said: "It's a blessing, for sure. I didn't expect to get started in open-wheel in this way. It's definitely a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and I'm very grateful for it."



Rowe is first in the seat

Force Indy boss Rod Reid added: "We vetted many deserving young men and women and chose Myles based on his ability and performance, inside and outside of the cockpit. He understands Force Indy's mission. He's a great fit for the team."

MOTORSPORT UK HAILS FIRST ONLINE OFFICIALS' LEARNING WEEK

Motorsport UK held its first officials learning and development week last month with over 2000 participants joining the online webinar series.

Covid restrictions meant the pre-season workshops, normally run as a series of seminars across the UK, moved online with nine webinars taking place for clerks of the course, stewards, timekeepers, scrutineers, rescue and recovery crews and event organisers.

The week started with update and recap sessions introduced by Motorsport UK CEO Hugh Chambers, and delegates were then invited to specific sessions for their discipline or line of work. Motorsport UK panels answered over 800 questions during the workshops.

Officials' training moved online this year due to Covid

The governing body's officials pathway manager James Betchley said: "We are delighted with the feedback we have received. We have missed the yearly meet-up. However, with our inaugural webinar series, we have been able to reach much more of our community and talk to them directly, by tailoring different sessions for different groups."

YOUNG BRIT LINSCOTT WINS US F4 SCHOLARSHIP CHANCE

Motorsport UK Academy's Emily Linscott will compete in United States Formula 4 this season with the successful Kiwi Motorsport team after winning a PMH Powering Diversity scholarship.

Linscott took runners-up place in the programme and gets fees to all 2021's promoter test days and 18 F4 US races. The 18-year-old former Ginetta Junior racer is mentored by Pippa Mann and last year competed in the Lucas Oil Race School Formula Car series.

Kiwi Motorsport is F4 US's only female-owned race team and has won the last three F4 US team titles plus 2019's drivers' crown.

Linscott said: "We have been speaking to Teena Larsen [Kiwi Motorsport co-owner] about racing with Kiwi Motorsport in the F4 US championship for a couple of years now, but I've never managed to raise enough budget. The scholarship really helped me secure the drive, so I aim to make the best use of it when I'm on and off the track to repay [the scholarship head's] and Kiwi Motorsport's faith in me as being a positive role model and diversity in motorsport representative."

Diversity scholarship prize helped Linscott secure drive

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RALLY NEWS

Pleased: Dan Barritt

ALL-ASPHALT RALLY SPAIN PLEASES BARRITT

British co-driver Dan Barritt has backed plans for an all-asphalt Rally Spain after organisers confirmed last week the penultimate round of this year's World Rally Championship would abandon the mixed-surface format used since 2010.

The move to asphalt only delivers on a commitment to the teams from organiser RACC for the 2019 edition of the Salou-based event to be the last to feature a gravel leg in order to reduce costs.

Competing teams had become increasingly unhappy about the need to test on both surfaces and then invest in bringing extra spares to the rally to enable cars to be set up in gravel and then asphalt trim for the final two days of action.

"It makes it a little bit easier with the preparation because you only test on Tarmac instead of having to do both," said Barritt, who co-drives for Takamoto Katsuta. "To get the mindset to drive on gravel one day and then drive on Tarmac style is not always easy for the drivers. OK the guys are good enough to adapt but there's definitely a big contrast between the gravel and the Tar.

"And then there's the cost for the teams. But the best thing about going all-Tarmac is that we will go back to roads that haven't been used for a long time because of the gravel mix. The stages are nice and smooth and really enjoyable to co-drive on."

Rally Spain will again be based in Salou on the Costa Daurada south of Barcelona, from October 14-17.

M-SPORT'S 2022 RALLY1 PROJECT INDEPENDENT OF 2021 BUDGET

Team principal Rich Millener says the M-Sport team is heading in a "new direction"

Photos: M-Sport, FIA, Toyota Gazoo Racing, Red Bull Content Pool, EKS

No corners are being cut for 2022

By Graham Lister

M-Sport's Rally1 project remains on target with Richard Millener telling Motorsport News that it's being funded separately to its current Fiesta-based World Rally Car effort.

Team principal Millener has made no secret of M-Sport's limited budget but confirmed the build of the hybrid-focused Rally1 car isn't taking finance away from its existing World Rally Championship programme, adding that the necessary resources for its 2022 contender have already been allocated.

"We're very lucky in the fact that Ford are fully committed to [the 2022 car costs] and that's a separate allocation of budget to the [current] programme," Millener told MN. However he also urged caution that its 2021 WRC attack – for which Gus Greensmith is the only confirmed season-long driver – has to run to a shoestring budget due to the effects that Covid-19 has had on its customer car sales and parts business.

"We have to be mindful of 2021 and the after effects from last year," Millener said. "We're having to re-focus and go in a new direction for the company at the moment by making sure we can operate with less people and be really strict on all our spending and cost. But, at the same time, you've still got to balance that with being as competitive as possible. Certainly, it's been a challenge to match what's available and be as competitive as we can but we are happy with the balance."

Contrary to Hayden Paddon's comments in last week's MN (February 11), the new Rally1 rules are frozen for three years, rather than five. And with hybrid kits due to be delivered to teams next month, the development of the new-generation Rally1 cars – the rules for which Hyundai, M-Sport and Toyota helped to formalise – is expected to be completed significantly ahead of the New Zealander's own project.

BERTELLI IN A WRC RETURN WITH FIESTA

M-Sport is entering a third Ford Fiesta WRC on Arctic Rally Finland later this month with Lorenzo Bertelli set to start his first World championship counter since Chile in May 2019.

The Italian, who is the son of Miuccia Prada and Patrizio Bertelli (joint chief executives of the Prada fashion house) had retired from full-time driving to head up Prada's marketing and communications division. But he's returning to the WRC on the Rovaniemi-based event from February 26-28, his first rally of any kind since Chile's world qualifier ended on May 12, 2019.

Bertelli's inclusion among the M-Sport ranks in Lapland follows on from team principal Richard Millener's comments last month when he confirmed efforts were being made to field additional drivers on selected events during the 2021 season.

"There are some interesting events and it maybe that we can find a way to get some other people in," he told Motorsport News.

Teemu Suninen will partner Gus Greensmith in the other two cars, with Adrien Fourmaux competing in a fierce WRC 2 field that includes former M-Sport man Esapekka Lappi. Local driver Janne Tuohino is entered in a fourth Fiesta WRC for the privateer JanPro squad.

Bertelli drove a Fiesta WRC on the snow two years ago

Rally Star is aiming to find the next world champion

DIGITAL ELEMENT ADDED TO FIA RALLY STAR PROGRAMME

The FIA has introduced a new route into the Rally Star talent search programme, making it possible for gamers to become World Rally Championship drivers for less than £50.

Twelve 'rally at home' events are being organised from February 27 until August 26. They will be open to drivers aged 17 to 26 using WRC 9, the official video game of the WRC from NACON and KT Racing.

The 12 winners will qualify for one of the six continental finals depending on where they live.

WRC 9, which is available for PlayStation, Xbox and PC, retails at £39.00, while the FIA Rally Star DLC costs £7.99 for a total outlay of £49.98. The eventual prize is coaching, testing and national competition in a Rally3 car before potentially a Junior WRC campaign in 2023.

Jerome Roussel, the FIA's regional rally manager who heads up the Rally Star programme, said: "The new level of realism in WRC 9 gives us the opportunity to propose this challenge to all of the sport's fans around the world.

"The next Sebastien Loeb, Ott Tanak or Sebastien Ogier may well already be practising on their console or PC. We just need to find them."

With Covid-19 making it increasingly difficult for ASNs around the world to organise their own mass-participation selection events, the WRC 9-based 'rally at home' route is expected to be used more and more to select continental finalists as well as increasing participation.

Motorsport Ireland and Motorsport UK have yet to announce their official involvement in FIA Rally Star but both are expected to organise selection events to determine their drivers for the European final.

WORLD RX CHAMPS EKSTROM AND KRISTOFFERSSON TO BATTLE IN WRC

World Rallycross champions Mattias Ekstrom and Johan Kristoffersson will go head-to-head in the WRC 3 category of Arctic Rally Finland later this month.

Ekstrom – making his first WRC start in 15 years – will drive a Skoda Fabia Rally2 evo run by EKS JC while Kristoffersson will pilot his Kristofferson Motorsport team's Volkswagen Polo R5.

"Rally has been a life-long passion of mine and going to the Arctic Rally Finland is a bucket-list dream, that I finally get to tick off," said Ekstrom. "For 2021 I have committed to the Extreme E series, that requires very diverse set of knowledge and skills of driving on various surfaces. The WRC event at Arctic Rally Finland is a perfect event for me to stay sharp, to drive hundreds of kilometres on ice and snow and also to renew my passion for rallying."

Ekstrom to make WRC comeback

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RALLY NEWS

LIVE RALLY TRACKING SOON AVAILABLE FOR SPECTATORS

Sporttraxx chiefs hope its tracking devices will be used for entertainment value as well as for safety with a bespoke website coming online, allowing anybody to view live tracking on UK rallies when events get back underway.

The website – which is being built – aims to become a hub of data with rally itineraries, entry lists and results all complementing the live tracking.

British Rally Championship-winning co-driver Craig Parry, the UK Sporttraxx representative, explained to MN that the hope is to eventually sell advertising space on the website that would, in turn, bring the cost of the trackers down for event organisers.

"We're not there to make a quick buck out of it, it's to put something back into the sport," Parry said. "It might only be the difference of £5 per car, but over a 100-car entry that £500 makes quite a big difference with the numbers on events cut so fine.

"If we can subsidise that cost then hopefully more events will take the tracking system on as for me it's the best thing out there."

On the new tracking service, Parry added: "In the UK I don't think it's been done for a national-level event which is why we're quite excited about it.

"It will allow people sat at home to watch friends, family or even just the rally in general with a very basic map that shows the cars moving along with some small interaction.

"It might sound like just watching dots across a map, but it's quite mesmerising. I think it's something that could be quite addictive for people."

New venture: Craig Parry

Photos: Jakob Ebrey

Rallies in forests were under scrutiny

FORESTRY ENGLAND KEEN TO HELP RALLYING TO SUCCEED

Bridgette Hall says the organisation is "pleased" to welcome motorsport back to the forests

The passion rallying has for forests was made clear

By Luke Barry

Forestry England has outlined the importance of motorsport to the English forestry estate in an exclusive interview with Motorsport News following the culmination of a review into motorsport on its land.

The findings of the review, which was open for consultation in September last year, were published on February 4 and opened the door for rallies to once again be organised on Forestry England land after a temporary suspension. Forestry England is now working closely with Motorsport UK to evolve working practices and sustain motorsport in the forests.

Bridgette Hall, Forestry England's head of recreation and visitor experience, told MN: "We're at the start of a new relationship where both sides, us as the land managers and custodians of the forests and the sport, work together to think about what the sport could look like in the future in all aspects with a view to make the sport environmentally, socially and economically sustainable.

"In the future it will all be about the right event at the right location at the right time of year.

"Over the next five-year period we are going to do some focused work to start to realise the potential [of motorsport in the forests] and make some of the changes we agree we'll need to make along the way."

Motorsport and England's forests have a close affinity, with rallies from club to world level taking place in the venues for generations. Forestry England subsequently received some 1700 responses to its consultation but Hall says she wasn't surprised by that.

"Back in 2010 when the government was considering the future of the public forest estate, the motorsport sector was hugely supportive and very clear about the need for a public forest estate," she said. "So I'm not surprised that the passion and that love for having motorsport within the forests came out again over a decade later.

"As an organisation we're just really pleased that there was so much interest and also pleased that we've been able to set the framework for a much longer project to secure a more sustainable future."

CLOSED-ROAD ORGANISERS COMBINING TO HELP EACH OTHER

A group of closed-road event organisers have clubbed together to create CROME (Closed-Road Organisers of Motorsport Events GB) in a bid to improve communication and troubleshoot problems.

A growing number of closed-road rallies are being organised around the country, but the majority of event organisers are fresh to the concept as this style of event only became feasible when legislation changed in 2017. Richard Crozier, one of CROME's founding member who's involved in organising the Ulster and Coast2Coast Rallies, wants to create a "big brother" atmosphere where organising teams can lean on each other.

"It kind of makes sense to just share experiences," Crozier told MN. "People are at different phases of the process obviously, Tendring & Clacton is a few years down the line but you've got events coming on stream which are completely new and it can be an intimidating process.

"You sort of have that big brother kind of thing where you've got the people that have been there and done it and you can nurture people and help speed up the process rather than just us all feeling like we're in it alone."

Jim Clark is an established rally but many are fledgling

POSITION AVAILABLE

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MILNE ENJOYING EUROPEAN RALLYING TO STAY MATCH FIT

Freddie Milne was delighted to get competitive mileage with a drive to fourth place on the recent Rally Lloret de Mar in Spain in a Ford Fiesta Rally2.

On just his second Tarmac rally, Milne set fastest time on the opening stage before running wide and damaging his radiator on stage two. A second scratch time of the weekend elevated him to fourth at the finish.

"The real cost of time was my mindset after that [incident]. I just wasn't myself, I was in safety mode not attack mode," Milne told MN. "Everyone was very welcoming and the organisers came over and thanked us for coming. It was really nice to do the first stage, do a good time at least on that one, and not make a complete arse of it!"

Scotsman Milne, who is staying in Spain, has a provisional plan to do Rallye Tierras Atlas de Lorca on gravel as well as Rally Portugal in the WRC, but says his "real goal" remains winning the SRC.

"If I was a better driver I'd maybe look at something like the BRC but I think it's really quite out of reach for somebody of my ability level," he said. "But the Scottish title, rightly or wrongly, I feel like it could be had."

WRC PROMOTER STEPS IN TO RUN WORLD RX

World Rallycross Championship has its first new promoter since its inception in 2014

Photos: World RX, Chicane Media, Retro RX, RX2e, 5 Nations British Rallycross

WRC Promoter sees "growth potential in all areas" from the top level of rallycross

By Hal Ridge

The World Rallycross Championship will be promoted by the World Rally Championship Promoter Group from this season, replacing previous commercial rights holder IMG.

WRC Promoter and the FIA are working on finalising a multi-year promoter agreement for the German-based company to hold the commercial and media rights for the series. WRC Promoter has "committed to investment in the World championship and in particular the development of the future electrification of rallycross," said a statement from the FIA.

WRC Promoter managing director Jona Siebel said: "World Rallycross sits on the verge of an innovative and pioneering future. We see strong growth potential in all areas and WRC Promoter is delighted to be at the forefront of a series focused on sustainable technology and e-mobility."

This year, the new all-electric FIA RX2e Championship will be launched as World RX's undercard, before the discipline's top flight RX1 cars (formerly known as Supercar) are switched to electric power from 2022.

That electric switch has enthused Kevin Hansen, who believes having WRC Promoter onboard will only mean good things for rallycross following the model it has created for rallying.

Hansen said: "I'm young, eager and hungry to win a World championship, and going for the title now with WRC Promoter in charge should give myself and my rivals the opportunity to become stars worldwide while trying to win it. I'm really looking forward to the electric revolution in the championship."

The FIA launched a second tender process in January in search for a promotor for the FIA European Rallycross Championship from 2022 to 2025.

The Euro RX series and its classes, RX1 (Supercar) and RX3 (Super1600) for conventional internal combustion engine machines will be promoted separately to the all-electric World RX roster from next year. The provisional 2021 World RX calender is planned to begin at Spa Francorchamps in Belgium in May.

Applications are open to run the iconic Mull Rally

NEW LEADERSHIP FOR ICONIC MULL RALLY

The Mull Rally will have a change of leadership next year as clerk of the course Andy Jardine and deputy Duncan Brown have decided 2021 will be their last.

The Mull Rally Guardians – the body that oversees the event – are now looking for their replacements. Guardian Donald Brown told MN: "We're very, very grateful for what Andy and Duncan have done for the event. They've both been at the forefront of the organisation for the last eight years, but they're ready to step aside and let somebody else take the reins.

"We'd like to get people in place as soon as possible – it would certainly be useful for them to be involved in the 2021 event. This is an opportunity to come and help shape the future."

The route this year will be similar to 2019 when the rally last ran but Mull will be included as a round of the British Rally Championship for the first time this year. BRC manager and former Mull clerk Iain Campbell said: "I loved my time as Mull clerk of the course – it was and is one of the most rewarding roles in rallying.

"I remember the first time Andy [Jardine] and I went into some of the primary schools to talk to the children about rally coming to the island. Immediately, they were telling us who won last year and where this car went off and why this person should have won. It was amazing. But it showed just how very powerful Mull Rally is."

Interested candidates should get in touch with info@mullrally.org.

Kelly loves Lydden Hill

KELLY ATTRACTED TO BRITISH RALLYCROSS

Irish Rallycross champion Declan Kelly plans to race in British Rallycross Championship 5 Nations Trophy events this season in an Olsbergs-MSE-built Ford Fiesta Supercar.

Kelly acquired the ex-Brian Deegan and Patrik Sandell Global Rallycross Championship machine in 2019 and contested two Irish events last season.

Kelly said: "I've only done two events in the car and it's a different beast to my old car. Number one on my bucket list was to own a real Supercar, number two is to drive it at Lydden Hill. Covid restrictions permitting, I hope to achieve number two real soon."

Kelly will have two opportunities to race in 5 Nations BRX at Lydden Hill this year, on May 29-31 and November 6-7, while the series plans to host its third round at Mondello Park in his native Ireland on July 10-11.

LYNCH TARGETING THE TITLE IN RETRO RX

Retro Rallycross champion Gary Simpson, Group B campaigner Steve Harris, 2020 series newcomer Nigel Davey and multiple rallycross champion Tony Lynch will all return to Retro RX this season.

While Simpson, Harris and Davey will continue to campaign their BMW E30, Ford RS200 and Peugeot 205 respectively, Lynch will focus fully on the championship for period machinery this year with his Toyota MR2, having contested a dual programme with his Ford Ka Supernational machine in the BTRDA Clubmans series last year.

Lynch explained: "Last season was a real challenge for us all for obvious reasons, but we continued to make progress with the Toyota in the limited events that we were able to take part in.

"That leaves me feeling confident going into 2021 about what we can achieve on track in what will hopefully be a more 'regular' season than the one that has just gone.

"Having continued to work on developing the car last year, we have a number of further upgrades planned for this season that should allow us to get more from the package we have, and our aim is very much to aim to fight for regular wins and go for the title."

Tony Lynch is developing his little MR2 into a winner

RX2e is brand new for 2021

RX2e A POSSIBILITY FOR FORMER BRITISH JUNIOR STEINSHOLT

Former British Junior Rallycross Championship contender Ole Henry Steinsholt is this year eyeing a switch to the RX2e electric category – the official support class to World RX.

Norwegian driver Steinsholt finished second in the Junior RX series in 2017 and subsequently graduated to race in the Super1600 category (now known as RX3) in the European Rallycross Championship. He tested the QEV and OlsbergsMSE developed RX2e car for two days in Spain last week.

"It was great to be at the Calafat Race circuit to try out the RX2e car," said Steinsholt. "We'll see what the future will bring, but we are sure that the future is about electric [cars]. Now I'm going to evaluate with my team what to do for 2021, but it was a great experience for me, the team behind it [QEV] is super professional."

Former World RX driver Guillaume De Ridder, French rallycross ace Damien Meunier and former RX Academy driver Pepe Arque were also at the test.

Advertising enquiries: 01233 228753

HISTORICS

DOWN THE WORKSHOP

IAIN ROWLEY
Formula Atlantic fan
Age: 68 Lives: Reading

Rowley: Formula Atlantic fan

He liked last week's MN
"The feature in Motorsport News last week on Formula Atlantic was great. I'm a big fan of the category and I've got a March 79B. I only get to race it a couple of times as year and we organised the Atlantic race with the HSCC at Anglesey in 2019."

He's always lusted after the cars
"Back in the 1970s and 1980s when we were racing in Formula 4, we'd quite often support Formula 3 or Formula Atlantic and we used to go around the paddock and lust after the cars, especially the Atlantics. I always thought they were proper racing cars with a proper BDA engine and for me, that was the thing I always wanted."

Atlantic is accessible
"You couldn't afford to do Formula 2 back in the day, but you might be able to afford Formula Atlantic and of course they were raced worldwide. I still reckon that the average bloke with some mechanical knowledge could run a Formula Atlantic. A friend of mine, Anthony Denham, built me an engine."

He'll do the 2021 Thruxton race
"They are lovely cars to drive and you can still pick them up for pretty sensible money. Rob Manger is running the historic single-seater race at the Thruxton Historic in June and we'll try and support that, and you can do Historic F2 and the Aurora Trophy with them."

His March only does a few races
"I wish I'd had my car 20 years ago. I've probably had it 10 years now, but we only really got it out two or three years ago. I couldn't afford to buy it but the guy I bought it off let me pay it off by instalments. It's just wonderful and it was something that I really wanted to do."

More cars are coming
"I do get calls from people who want Formula Atlantic cars. And there are some of the later cars from the 1980s coming back out as well. When I was down in New Zealand with the Formula Juniors, there were lots of Ralt RT4s and there are cars in North America as well. They are still pretty affordable and I know of at least four cars that have come back to the UK over the winter."

LANGRIDGE COMPLETES THE SET WITH FORMULA 2 TECNO

Ex-Martin Birrane car rebuilt and ready for the 2021 racing season

By Paul Lawrence

Photos: Paul Lawrence

Father and son will race the F2 Tecno

A Tecno Formula 2 car raced in period by Martin Birrane will be back on track this season in the hands of Andy Langridge and his son Adrian.

The 1968 single-seater has recently been rebuilt by Greg Caton and was once run by the Dorset Racing Associates team. Now the car will be tended by Dan Eagling at Lifetime Racing and driven by both father and son.

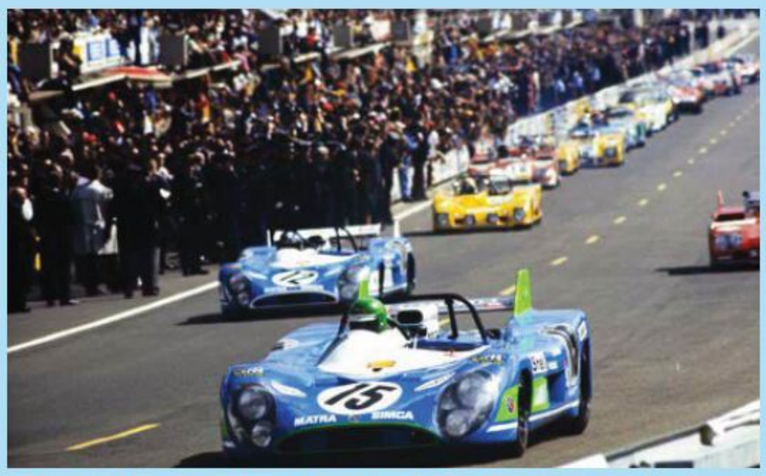
For Andy Langridge, the Tecno will allow him to complete a remarkable clean sweep of racing in historic categories. To date, he has raced in Formula Ford 1600, Formula Ford 2000, 1600cc Formula 3, two-litre F3 and Historic Formula 1. The Formula 2 category is currently missing but will be added this season. Adrian, meanwhile, was Classic F3 champion in 2019.

"We have not decided where to run it yet, although I'm guessing with the current situation it will only be in the UK," said Andy.

"I think also that Adrian and I will alternate drives. Formula 2 is a gap in my portfolio, so that will be all the UK circuits and all the formula car boxes ticked," said Langridge who has now raced on all current UK tracks.

To make way for the Tecno, Langridge has sold the March 803 that Adrian took to the Classic F3 crown. It has gone to Shaun Hollamby as it was originally a Super Vee car raced successfully by his late father Olly.

The Langridges also have a Ginetta G16 sports-racing car nearly ready and plan to run it in Guards Trophy races.



Pescarolo leading the Le Mans field away in 1972 in the Matra

MATRA HEADLINES THE CLASSICS UNDER THE HAMMER IN PARIS

A unique collection of Group B rally cars collected by Frenchmen Michel Hommel and Olivier Quesnel was recently sold at auction in Paris.

However, the biggest price went to the 1972 Le Mans-winning Matra MS670 of Henri Pescarolo and Graham Hill, which sold for £6 million.

An original Lancia Delta S4 driven in ice racing and rallycross by Bruno Saby sold for £700,000, while Saby's 1986 Tour de Corse-winning Peugeot 205 T16 E2 went under the hammer for over £850,000.

Top of the rally cars, even though it did not run in the Group B era was an Audi quattro S1 used in the 1988 Race of Champions, which sold for £1.7 million.

ACHESON RECREATES TITLE-WINNING 1978 FF1600 ROYALE

Acheson has bought a Royale to echo his Formula Ford titles

Multiple Formula Ford champion Kenny Acheson has had a Formula Ford 1600 Royale RP24 restored to the exact livery of his 1978 car.

The Northern Irishman asked former Royale boss Alan Cornock to find an RP24 as a tribute to his 1978 campaign that netted all three major UK Formula Ford titles.

"We bought a nice car and fitted new bodywork and restored it to the exact period livery of Kenneth's sponsor, RMC," said Cornock. "In 1978 it was a works car run by Paul Thompson for Royale."

The base car is the ex-Tony Barley, chassis 57.

Acheson's original RP24 was sold at the end of the 1978 season and later written off so the chassis no longer exists. Acheson, now based in Wiltshire, says he has no plans to race the car.

CO-DRIVER SYER PASSES AWAY

MN was sad to learn of the death of Johnstone Syer, one of Britain's leading co-drivers of the 1970s.

He was renowned as great company and was a very popular character. The Scot started rallying in the early 1960s and really came to prominence when he teamed up with Brian Culcheth in various works cars and they won the 1970 Scottish Rally and took second on the 1970 World Cup Rally in a Triumph 2.5. That was followed by success in TR7s and Dolomite Sprints.

He co-drove for Andrew Cowan and finished third on 1980's Cyprus Rally in a Colt Lancer. After his rallying career, Syer worked as a professional photographer in Dunfermline for many years.

IN BRIEF

Eddie Walder
MN was sorry to learn of the death of Eddie Walder, one of the voices of hillclimbing. Midlands-based Eddie was a huge supporter of hillclimbing and was both a commentator and reporter and regularly worked for Motorsport News. He was a popular part of the Shelsley Walsh commentary team and will be sadly missed by his many friends in motorsport.

Trophy heroes
Damon Hill and Ian Flux will be celebrated within the Jochen Rindt Trophy race at the Thruxton Historic in June. The race for historic single-seaters will include an F3 class in Hill's name and a Formula Atlantic class in honour of Flux. The evergreen 'Fluxie' raced in the final three years of British Formula Atlantic in the early 1980s and plans to helicopter in to Thruxton to present the awards.

Push for Appendix K
The Historic Sports Car Club is pushing to attract cars running to FIA Appendix K regulations into the Historic Road Sports championship. The invitation is to all under three-litre Appendix K cars, which will include MGBs, Triumph TR4s, Morgans, TVR Granturas and two-litre Porsche 911s. Cars that conform to Appendix K but do not have current papers will also be welcome.

Hamilton Jag on track
Two decades after it was damaged at Oulton Park, the mighty 7.3-litre Jaguar E-type raced to many successes by Malcolm Hamilton is once more complete. The current owner has patiently rebuilt the 750bhp, 180mph monster and it will soon be offered for sale by Hampsons Auctions. Across 13 seasons up to 2001, Hamilton took the highly developed Rob Beere Engineering car to 52 race wins.

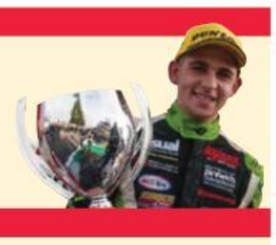
Heritage date swap
The inaugural Heritage Trial, run by the Midland Trials Car Club, has been rescheduled for Sunday July 4 at a site near Crewkerne in Somerset. Postponed from 2020, the trial will be the first to run for solely for trials cars from the immediate post-war years including cars I ike Dellows. A bumper entry had been assembled for the 2020 event before it was lost to the Covid pandemic.

F3 goes VSCC
Two generations of Formula 3 car will race during the Vintage Sports-Car Club's annual season opening race meeting at Silverstone on Saturday April 17. The event will mark the first races of the year for both the one-litre cars in the Historic F3 Championship and the earlier 500cc F3 cars in the 500 Owners' Association championship.

North Wales get-go
The news of the cancellation of the Red Kite Stages for 2021 means that the revised opening event of the Motorsport UK British Historic Rally Championship will now be Rally North Wales on Saturday June 26. The Red Kite had been scheduled to run in the forests of South Wales on June 13.

COLUMNIST

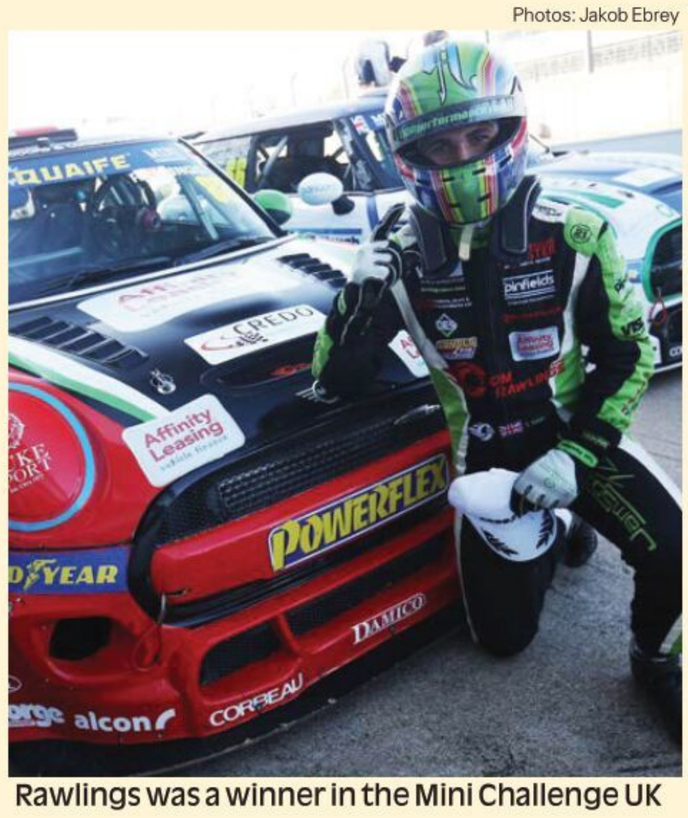
TOM RAWLINGS



Young up-and-coming racer who is making steps to a sportscar future

Photos: Jakob Ebrey

Dream maker: the McLaren GT4



Rawlings was a winner in the Mini Challenge UK

I have had a taste of the big time over the last few weeks, and it has made me more determined than ever to make my dreams come true. Over the closed season, I have been lucky enough to drive both a McLaren 570S GT4 and a Toyota Supra GT4 and I certainly know my future is in GT racing: now I just need to make it happen.

Firstly, a little about me: I finished seventh in the Mini Challenge UK in 2020 in my second year in the category. I was battling for a place in the top four of the points table, but I had a shunt in the finale at Brands Hatch that dented my hopes a little.

I really enjoyed the racing in the little pocket rockets, although I am desperate to move on now. GT racing would be the logical next step for me, in truth, and that is where my focus is for the future.

I have had quite a varied background since finishing my karting career 2016. I combined karting with some rallying in the F1000 division in a Nissan Micra and a Citroen C1 in the British F1000 Junior Rally Class in 2017. I enjoyed learning about motorsport and car control, while all the time waiting for my race licence.

When I got that, my first circuit experience was in the Monoposto championship in 2018 and I finished third in the 1000cc class in 2019 in a JKS chassis. But already I was dovetailing single-seaters with the Mini Challenge UK. I was used to handling a tin-top from the rally stages but I was pleased with ninth overall in the points in my first year of one of the UK's most competitive single-make series. The drama at the final round in 2020 was not the best way to end the year but I had been competitive throughout and took a win at Silverstone plus two other podiums.

My ambition is to look to a future in GT racing – be that in Europe or in the UK – and that taste I have had over the closed season has made me more determined than ever to make it a reality. It's like being given a Christmas present and opening it but then being told you then have to leave it under the tree…

[Respected driver manager] Dennis Rushen is looking after me and he has been helpful in making some introductions to some great people in the GT world. He put me in touch with [customer GT boss] Danny Buxton at McLaren and we organised a run at Blyton Park late last year. That was my first go in a pukka GT car and it really opened my eyes but also confirmed to me: these cars are where I want to be.

Buxton helped organise the run at Blyton Park

Armful of success: Rawlings has big ambitions

Then I got another chance more recently with Speedworks Motorsport to drive its Supra GT4 car. I had met team boss Christian Dick at a round of the British GT championship. I had a good look at the car that day and I sat in it. He showed me around the cockpit and joked that I would have to go along and have a test day with him. I didn't think it would actually happen but he called up and invited me to Oulton Park. It was amazing, another brilliant experience and I got about 30 laps.

I owe a big thanks to Danny Buxton and Christian Dick for those fantastic opportunities. It's hard work for every driver at the moment because sponsorship is so hard to come by and we rely upon that to go racing. I am prepared to put the effort in, though, because I have had a glimpse of where it could lead.

When you work hard for it, it also means that when you do get a deal together, you are so hungry to make it succeed. I think it might give you a small edge on track when you know it is all on the line.

I certainly don't lack the commitment, and I will be working my socks off over the next few months to make sure that I finally do get that Christmas present back out from under the tree and make my racing dreams come true in 2021.

"It really opened my eyes and confirmed to me: this is where I want to be"

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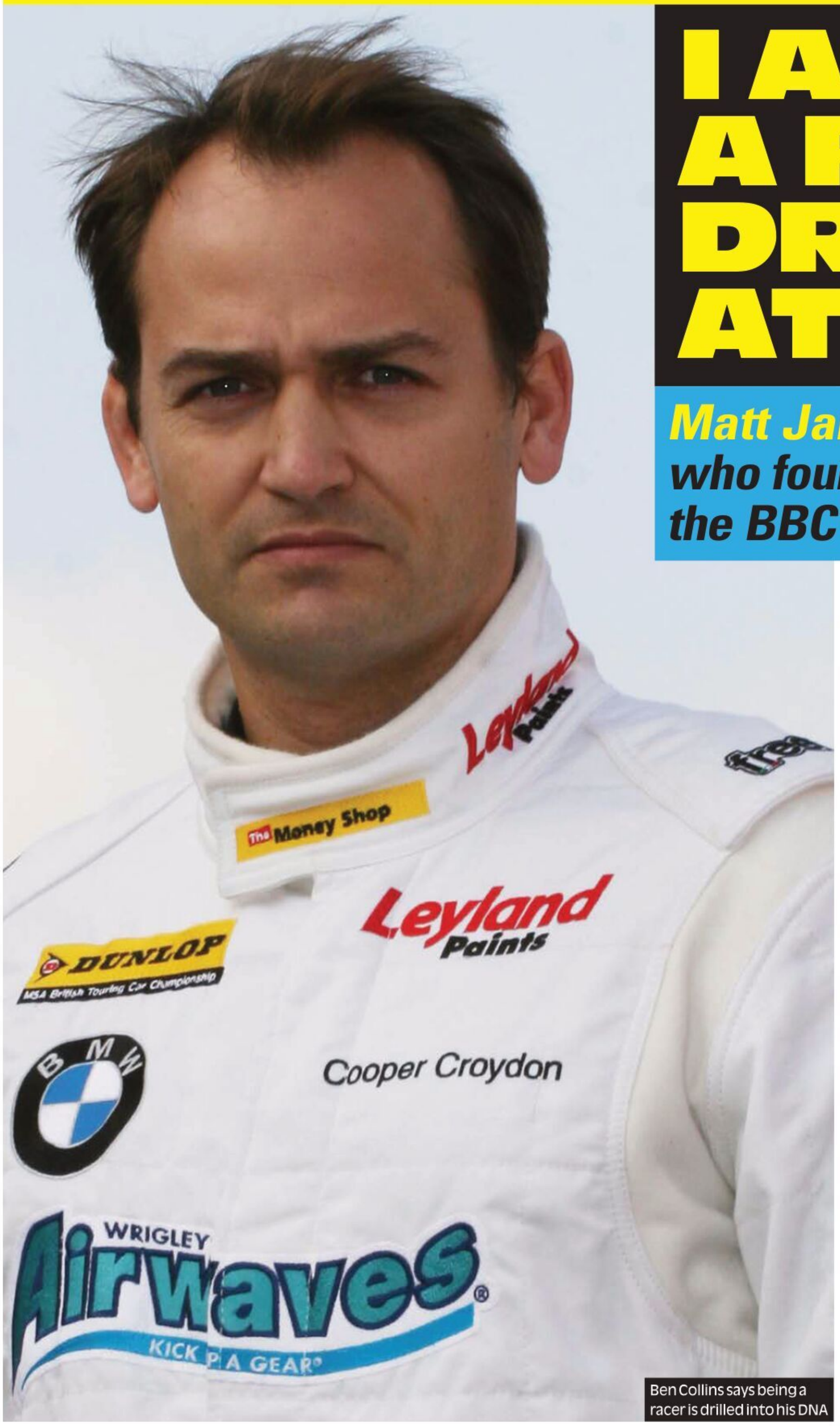
FEATURE

BEN COLLINS



Ben Collins says being a racer is drilled into his DNA

I AM STILL A RACING DRIVER AT HEART

Matt James spoke to the racer who found infamy as the Stig on the BBC's Top Gear *programme*

Bizarrely, Ben Collins is now best known for a television role where he can't talk or be identified. But his job as *Top Gear*'s resident tame racing driver brought him to the front pages of the national newspapers.

Had life taken a slightly different turn earlier on in his career, he could well have been writing the headlines on the sports pages instead.

He showed a lot of promise in his formative years racing in the UK, progressing through Formula Vauxhall Junior, Formula Vauxhall and then on to British Formula 3.

As is the case with so many young drivers, the finance wasn't there to complete his journey.

Instead, he turned his hand to the small screen while trying to maintain his racing programmes. He raced at Le Mans four times and even had a chance to tackle three rounds of the Australian Supercar series including sharing a Holden at Bathurst in 2009.

Collins has worked on a number of films doing the driving work, including being a stunt double for Daniel Craig in the *Quantum of Solace* James Bond movie and in the *Ford v Ferrari* epic that was released in 2019.

Last week, he found time to tackle the Motorsport News readers' questions.

Question: Was it always your dream to be a grand prix driver? Was the interest sparked by your father Bill?
John Charles
Via email

Ben Collins: "We had a model of a JPS black Lotus Formula 1 car on the mantlepiece for years and I used to gaze at it. It was a beautiful thing, there was something about the fat slick tyres, and the wings and that evocative livery. I was mesmerised. But, actually, racing was pretty remote. I wasn't one of those people who would really watch grand prix racing. Dad did but even he would fall asleep: I would watch maybe a lap or something.

"The real thrill for me was being a passenger on any trip that involved dad behind the wheel. There was always space for an overtaking move. Some of his more manic moves came when he had a Rover SD1. They were eye-openers! I thought it was great fun, and I used to pull the handbrake coming out of the drive and we would go for it. I had a little pedal kart as a kid which was a scaled-down version of the Formula 1 car with all the wings on it and stuff, and I would skid that around on the patio. I remember doing a figure of eight with the dog chasing me.

"Motorsport wasn't really in my thoughts and then I moved to America when I was very small. Sure, F1 is global now, but it was very European-focused back then so it wasn't really on the radar.

"I got into competition in a big way when I was in the USA. I was swimming a lot – training twice a day – and I was competing at the weekends and there is a bug that gets you when you compete. That started there.

"The racing thing didn't really kick in until I was 18. I was back in the UK and my dad bought me a racing school day at Silverstone. That was when the light switch went on for me. I still hadn't even been to a grand prix at that age. Dad had also started doing a bit of racing by then. He had worked hard all his life. He was very athletic as a younger guy but like a lot of businessmen, that got lost! Inside the body of this 16-stone man was the mind of an athlete still. He had earned his money, worked hard all his life and decided he wanted to go racing, so he was into it. My mum bought him his first trackday, which is something I am sure she regrets…

"Dad did a couple of races in Formula First for SpeedSport and then the guys said to him that he should do Formula Vauxhall Lotus. So there was this late 40s businessman stepping up to slicks

Photos: Motorsport Images, Jakob Ebrey

Learning the ropes: Ben Collins chases Justin Wilson in Vauxhall Junior in 1995

F3 graduation came with Class B in 1996

Mike Newton (l), Tommy Erdos (c) and Ben Collins at Le Mans in 2011

and wings with all the kids. Fortunately, with his experience of driving fast road cars, he didn't kill himself straight away! He was on the grid with the likes of Dario Franchitti and Kevin McGarrity. I went to watch him a few times – if anything just to validate the stories of derring-do that he would come back with – and I really enjoyed being in the paddock and being part of the scene. There was a different language, there was the hustle and bustle. But it still felt a million miles away from me doing doughnuts on a quadbike in a field outside our home."

MN: So if being a racing driver wasn't your plan, what was it?

BC: "I had always wanted to be a fighter pilot, that was the dream, but that turned to dust because they had very stringent and particular requirements with the eyesight. Although I have got perfect eyesight, they didn't like the conditions in one of my eyes, so that was parked. Not long after that came the chance to get in a single-seater at Silverstone – it was one of the school's own Formula Ford 1600 chassis. According to them – and I don't know whether to believe these things or not – I was under their school lap record in the first session, but then the engine blew up through no fault of my own. Steve Deeks was my instructor, and he said to my dad that maybe we should give it a shot. Sitting in a single-seater with your arse on the floor and looking at all the gauges, those first laps, it really cemented everything for me. The car was so ultra-responsive: it was like putting your hand into a glove. There was such an incredible bond with those cars. It was an immediate addiction and it was all I could talk about from there on in."

Question: Was it just grand prix racing or nothing for you when you first realised you wanted to race?
Emma Facey
Via email

BC: "I very much drunk my own Kool-Aid [an American expression for those who dream big despite the high risks]. I read two books, and they were the only things I had in my armoury. One was the Gilles Villeneuve book by Gerald Donaldson and the other was about Ayrton Senna. The Senna model seemed to be fairly clear, which was that you won all the races. That was the goal, but it wasn't a practical aim in your first season, hence I had so many crashes to begin with because I was very uncompromising. It took a while to sink in that you can't win all of them. It was some time before I realised that you had to gauge risk, rather than be bull-headed. It took three large crashes for that to sink in, and it was only when someone said 'if you do that again, you won't be racing anymore' for it to finally register. It was the team manager, he said there was nothing left to crash. I was on my last chassis. That actually gave me a useful sense of fear. I was enjoying myself, not thinking about the risks or the damage, and it was only the threat of not racing that really spoke to me and it was very powerful."

MN: By the time you got to Formula 3, you seemed to be more of a classical driver, a smoother driver? Is that true?

BC: "I had definitely learned the right way to drive by that point, that was embedded. To become complete, I still had lots to learn and I was still making some silly mistakes even into the F3 years, but a lot of that came from frustration because I was desperate and hell-bent to get to Formula 1 and nothing else really was in my consciousness. We knew we had been handicapped in F3 and we had an engine that was down-on-power, which I know is the perennial whinge. I would love to have done more in F3 and won more. It was the ultimate proving ground, it was so close and there were so many good drivers there."

Question: You drove for Jackie Stewart's Paul Stewart Racing team in Formula Vauxhall in the Winter Series in 1995. How much advice did he give you?
Russell Scobbie
Via email

BC: "He is an incredible man and at that point in my career, I was totally in awe of him. He is such a professional, and I guess it was like holding up a mirror to myself. He would come to the races immaculately dressed, prepared, he had a schedule. His influence was everywhere you looked in the team. It was just perfectly presented, and so driving for PSR gave you this incredible confidence. You could eat your breakfast off the floor of the awning. The car was so well prepared and they had thought of everything. Graham Taylor was the team manager and he was very astute, even to the smallest of things. Even down to things like them using different brake pads in qualifying than in the race. It would be more aggressive and the tyres could handle it in qualifying when they were brand new, but might have been prone to locking when the rubber was used. They taught you the package as a driver too. They were strict, but they taught you how to get the most from yourself as a racer."

Question: Who was the best of the crop you raced against in your early single-

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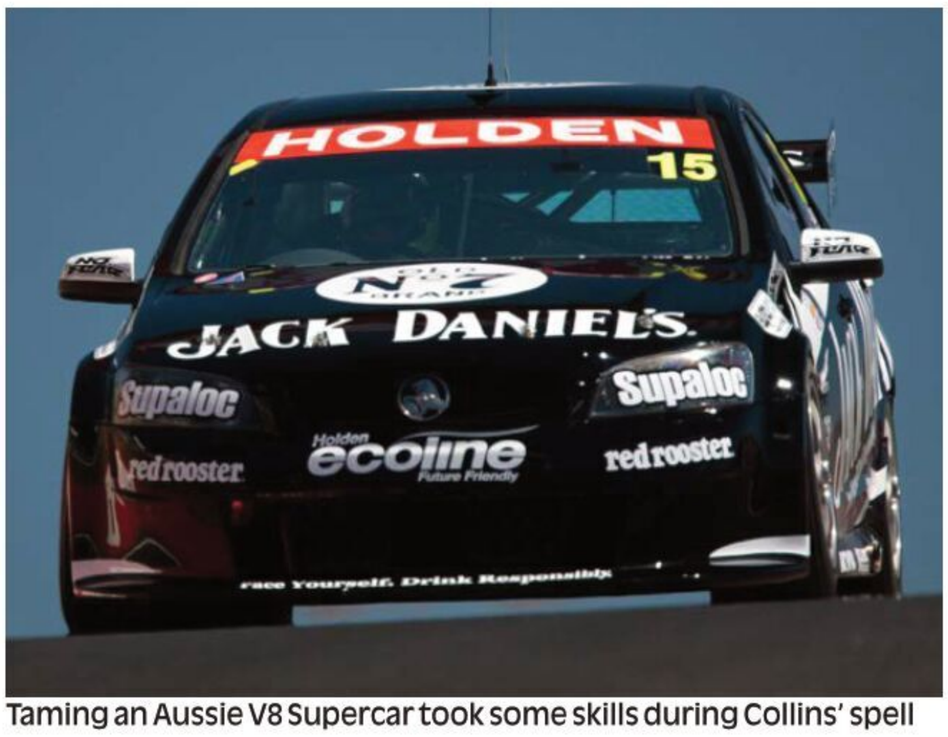
FEATURE

Collins was a winner with Ascari in 2001

The Stig's one-off in the BTCC was popular



Taming an Aussie V8 Supercar took some skills during Collins' spell

seater days? There was some real up-and-coming talent back then…
Jon Wood
Via email
BC: "People like Marc Hynes and Justin Wilson were very fair and you knew you were in for a good race with them. But in those early days, when I was in Formula Vauxhall Junior, the one you didn't really want to be racing wheel-to-wheel with was Darren Malkin. He was very fast, but he always seemed to be very angry.

"When we were together on track, it was a nightmare because you had two angry young men going side-by-side… you knew there would be no quarter with him, he would be tapping you all the time and the Vauxhall Junior cars were quite sensitive and other drivers could easily mess up the toe-links on the rear with a knock in the right place. Darren would be after those and doing all kinds of bad stuff.

"When you go up a level and you get into slicks-and-wings, some things change. Justin Wilson was very very talented and very ballsy and took to the downforce cars really well. But then look what Marc Hynes did by winning the British F3 title. I think Marc just took a bit more time to adapt to stuff"

Question: At what point in your career did you realise that the Formula 1 dream was not going to happen?
Barry May
Via email
BC: "Well, in my first year of Formula 3 [in 1996], I got as close to F1 as I was ever going to get – without realising it at the time. I had a meeting with Arrows. This was a very sobering meeting. There was an opportunity to become their test driver, and this opportunity came with a £1 million price tag – but even by modern standards, that was quite cheap.

"We had the talks, but I remember being quite surprised, because I thought you got paid to do that job as opposed to handing over the cash. But when you unpick a lot of these stories, that is the way it works. I think Niki Lauda paid to get into Formula 1 when he started out – even Ayrton Senna brought some funding too.

"I know there are some drivers who are plucked from the lower categories and put straight into grand prix racing, but that came as quite a shock to me. It was not what I expected, and I suppose at that point, the reality began to kick in that this was a financial exercise as much as it was about your skill. It was about who you know and who knows you. That put quite a dent in my rationale about what were my chances of pulling it off.

"It was then that I began to broaden my thinking and start looking at America and other places with opportunities where you could race at the weekend and actually win prize money, and that prize money could pay the rent and potentially you could get picked up by a sponsored team."

Question: ASCAR: how difficult were they to adapt to? They must have been so alien for any driver from Britain to get the hang of?
Neil Fletcher
Via email
BC: "I got in with then surprisingly easily. The bug adaption for me had been when I was doing Indy Lights in the USA. I was teamed with Scott Dixon in 1999. It's funny you ask about the emerging talent in the UK in my early days, but I think Scott was the best all-rounder I had driven alongside. I adapted to oval racing there, but it was in a single-seater and it was very fast. When I saw the ASCAR in the UK, I wasn't sure if I would be able to adapt to it because they looked like trucks. You sat inside it and it was so industrial, with a massive gearstick and these huge proportions. But as soon as you got going, all sense of the scale of the car disappeared and you went back to just doing what you do as a racing driver.

"All the sensations of the oval, I found, clicked into place and I felt completely at home. In a single-seater, when you lose grip on the oval it happens very quickly and so you have to creep up on the limit. There is a bit more leniency with the stock cars: not that much more, but a bit.

"In an ASCAR, running on your own on the track, I loved it. I loved the fast corners so that came together intuitively. You have got the wall there, but if you've raced around Macau, then that isn't a problem… The big difference is racing in a pack of cars. That draft changes the way things work and you can't see but you get weird telltale signs in your eardrums that the air pressure around you is changing. It is all very unusual and the car goes light. You realise that it is all about the holes in the air. It is strange, and there is a real dark art to this.

"I did two years of ASCAR, which is ASA level in the States, and then I did an ASA race in America too. And I also got a test in a NASCAR later on in my career for a magazine, and I did good enough times that I nearly got picked up: there were discussions. I was blown away by that."

> **"Going on TV was a career choice for me"**
>
> **Ben Collins**

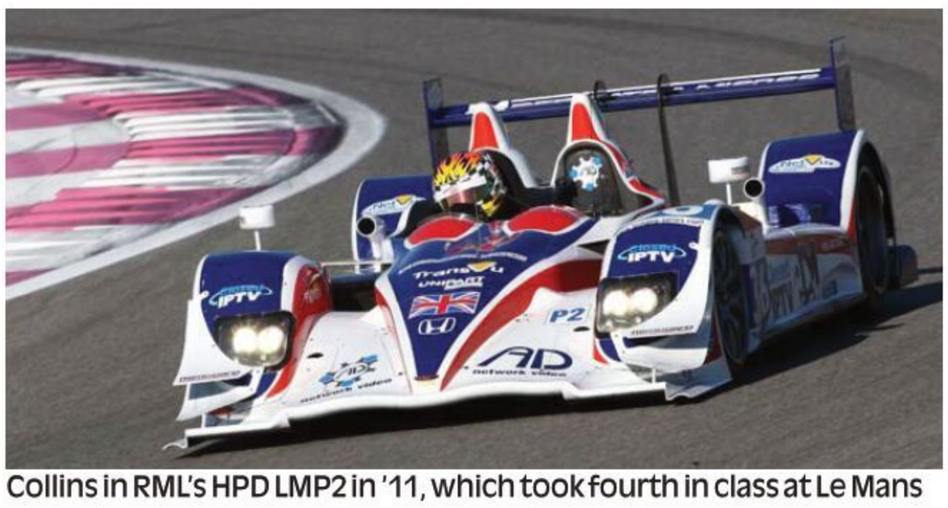
Question: Did being the Stig make it harder to get race deals? Even with the anonymity?
Anthony Wilson
Via email
BC: "Initially it made no difference because nobody knew that I was doing it. It didn't help, but it didn't really hinder me either. But then bizarrely, afterwards, I am not sure how motorsport people size you up. My gut feeling is that once you have crossed into television land, you are taken a little bit less seriously as a racing driver."
MN: When you signed up to do the Stig, was that a conscious career choice or was it just another job to pay the bills?
BC: "It was a career choice. I had come to realise that motorsport revolved around money, and nobody gives two hoots about a bloke ringing from their flat trying to get backing but they've never heard of you, etc. That was quite a familiar situation for me. I had seen some of the drivers like Darren Manning and Jason Plato cleverly getting themselves on TV, getting a bit of self-promotion going and I thought that was actually quite smart."
MN: But you were going to be anonymous as the Stig?
BC: "Yes but who knows where it was going to go? My gut feeling was that even that role was I would be a racing driver on TV, and I might have been able to get the cameras to go to the races and we could have taken this character into motorsport. That would have been the dream ticket, and towards the latter part of my time there that very nearly happened. We were on the verge of going to Le Mans with the LMP1 Aston Martin and do something serious.

"It never stopped me getting any motorsport deals, it just ran alongside what I was doing on track anyway. It was 2002-ish until 2010: I suppose very occasionally there would be a little bit of a conflict with diaries, but that didn't happen often."

If you were paid to drive fast in a blockbuster film, which film and which car would you choose from any era, past and present?
Mike Stokoe
Via Twitter
MN: *Bullitt*, surely?
BC: "I tell you why I'd say no to *Bullitt*, and that is because Steve McQueen did all of his own driving stunts in that one – you'd spend most of your time sat on the sidelines watching him do all the work!"
MN: *Le Mans*?
BC: "I did that, I did the driving in *Ford vs Ferrari*! *Le Mans* would have been cool, but maybe John Frankenheimer's *Ronin* [which features a six-minute car chase].

Who knows who is behind the helmet?

Collins loved the tough engineering challenge of the Macau circuit



Collins in RML's HPD LMP2 in '11, which took fourth in class at Le Mans

That was the picture that got me into movies, really."

Question: Who do you think was the best star you had in a reasonably priced car on* Top Gear*? Anyone who could have made it as a professional?
AutoTradition
Via Twitter
BC: "Jennifer Saunders was really good. There were lots of good talents on there. To be fair, if you were going to ask me who would make it as a professional racing driver, then I would have to say Tom Cruise because he could turn his mind to whatever he wanted to do. He wrung the neck of the car and he is fantastic: he is super physical and he does his own stunts, etc. But Jennifer Saunders was probably the most natural of all the stars I sat with and she was extremely fast. I don't know where it came from but I have heard subsequently that she is into her driving. She was really funny and just very laid back."

Question: Which celebrity driver scared you the most on the* Top Gear *test track?
Jack Crowther
Via email
BC: "Jimmy Carr and Chris Evans. I said to Chris 'you have absolutely no sense of self-preservation, do you?' He said 'a lot of people tell me that!' When you are going backwards across the grass at 80mph, it just didn't seem to be important to him to press the brake pedal. And Jimmy Carr, equally, had no sense whatsoever that he was in a vehicle. He seems quite imaginative when you see him perform, but there was no imagination behind the wheel! Perhaps he has never had a car crash before…"

Question: What is the best track you've raced at?
Malcom Munt
Via email
BC: "That has to be Macau. It is the ultimate challenge as a driver. You have got the long straight where it is all about the drag racing in the draft. It is game on and it makes it into an engineering dilemma in terms of the car's set-up. You want to be fast over the twisty hill, which is just mind-bogglingly insane to navigate, and you also want to be slippery down the straights. There is a tactical element to it, there is a proper racing element to it. Everything there is so touch and go, you have to be all-in in terms of commitment when you race around there to make a decent lap time and it is just quite a surreal experience to be driving in those type of streets. You have got everything from first- and second-gear corners where you are rubbing walls to being utterly flat-out. It is a great place."

Question: Why do European drivers struggle with Aussie V8s?
Damien Doherty
Via email
MN: Doing three races in 2009 with Kelly Racing must have been a real culture shock...
BC: "Everybody struggles with Aussie V8s – except the people who are in it regularly! I, like everybody else, looked at those cars and though 'great: these are big muscle cars'. I thought it would be right up my alley. But the tyres are half the width of a British GT car. So they look like GTs, but they are not. Not only are they narrower, they have bugger all grip. They are really under-tyred and then secondly you have the spool differential. You might think 'so what?' – it is just a different type of diff. But what surprised me was that you have this big brute car with an awesome V8, but it is dancing around in ballet shoes.

"There is no feedback from the tyres. There is so little feeling from the tyres that the drivers all wear these little buzzers that tell them when they have locked up. I have never experienced something like that before. That is for all the top guys, even drivers like Jamie Whincup. They have to, because you just can't tell. You press the brake and there is no rumble, no sense of broken traction, nothing, and then you realise that you've got a puncture because you have gone through the tyre.

"The whole thing is not what it looks like. It looks like you are arm wrestling a tiger, whereas you are actually dancing around on tip-toes."
MN: Did you enjoy it then?
BC: "I did enjoy it, yes, but it was not the balls-out racing that I thought it was. The racing is flat out, but the driving is very complicated. The only time it felt remotely natural was when the tyres were brand new. Then you could carry some speed into corners and start driving it the way you wanted to. Beyond that, nothing else resembles any other racing car I had been into. The guys who do it are very good, and guys who come into it are quite shocked with the driving style involved."

Collins was a winner in his F3 spell for Carlin in 2000

Question: Why was your appearance in British Touring Car Championship for Motorbase Performance only a one off? Do you want to do more?
Alison Ainsley
Via email
BC: "It was quite a fun weekend, that one. We had some gearbox trouble so I had hardly any running before the event and my first proper lap was the first lap of the first race at Brands Hatch. I started at the back with a new car that hadn't been fully set-up. I loved that weekend though but ultimately it all comes down to budget. Raising that kind of budget has become elusive but I would desperately love to go back into touring cars."

Question: Is there a race which you have yet to do that you would love to?
Dennis Burgess
Via email
BC: "I would still love to win Le Mans. That would be a dream and we came very close to winning the class in 2011. The Bathurst 12 Hours, that is another one. I went to do it in a Maranello Ferrari that I was sharing with Mika Salo and Tony D'Alberto. Mika went out in practice and was second quickest on hard tyres, so we knew we had a winning car. Then Tony went out and got it wrong in traffic and wrote the car off. I went back to Sydney with Mika and we went to the bar…"

Question: Who was your most talented team-mate you've ever had?
Ed Sleigh
Via email
BC: "I will go back to Scott Dixon as the best from my time in Indy Lights. He was not only fast in all respects but he had a very mature approach from a young age, which was a bit annoying for me! He had that other thing that you need to have as a racing driver, and that was that he was lucky. You'd see his car get hit or something, and you would be thinking to yourself 'how did that not rip a wheel off?' He is a great guy."

Question: Are you still a racing driver first and foremost? Or a stunt driver? Or a presenter?
Darren Matthews
Via email
BC: "All my skills developed from being a racing driver and that will never go away. It has set me up for the other work. I have loved the movies and stunt work, that has been fantastic. But it is the racing that underpins my make up. I am no longer a racer now because I don't have a drive but I haven't stopped. I am a racing driver at heart. I love the other things, but that racing-driver DNA is not going anywhere." ■

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FEATURE

Pickups bid farewell to Rockingham

CART hit the new UK oval 20 years ago

ROCKINGHAM: TOO MUCH TOO YOUNG?

Twenty years ago a purpose-built top-level oval circuit opened in the UK, ready to host stellar American single-seaters. Graham Keilloh explores what happened to the venue next

Too big for its boots? Original boss Peter Davies explains concept

Occasionally in motor racing you have to remind yourself that something *actually* happened. For a long time the thought of America's top-level single-seater racing coming to the UK, and on an especially built oval track, was tantalising. But it couldn't *actually* happen, could it?

It did. In 2001 and 2002 at Rockingham Motor Speedway, a 1.5-mile circuit in Corby, Northamptonshire. The track opened 20 years ago this year.

Sadly, though, racing engines at Rockingham have since fallen silent, as competition stopped at the end of 2018 so the site could be used instead as a logistics hub.

And Rockingham's tale is by now well-told. Its inaugural CART visit was disrupted by 'weepers', where water from previous heavy rain seeped through the surface. The crowd for CART's second visit was down. CART departed and the track continued largely as a club venue using its infield layout – far removed from original intentions. Furthermore, for much of that time the place's sense of drift, even decay, was noticeable.

Those close to the matter insist it wasn't so simple however. Let's start with the CART visits. "The major issue was that we had focused too much on earning substantial international TV revenues and not enough on making it a profitable UK-based business," Guy Hands, the project's major financier, tells Motorsport News.

"Today focusing on international revenues probably would work, but 20 years ago it was not the way you could make substantial sums of money; TV revenues were much less than they are today."

Contrary to some belief too Rockingham found favour with the American fraternity, despite the 'weeper' embarrassment. "They initially liked the venue a lot," Hands recalls. "It was incredibly fast, it was very attractive and it had an amazing stand with the opportunity to increase seating capacity for over 100,000."

Darren Manning, who raced in the 2002 CART event in a patriotic Team St George entry, concurs to MN: "I think they [the CART drivers] all loved it. Obviously the weather and the weepers they had a lot of issues.

"It was definitely a challenging track and the teams like that. When you go to places like those types of NASCAR superspeedways that are super easy for a Champ Car or IndyCar to get round, you're just a passenger! But at Rockingham you definitely drive it. As a driver you want to be making a difference."

Also, again contrary to some testimony, there was reciprocal UK enthusiasm at Rockingham too. "It was extraordinary," Hands remembers. "We ran out of merchandise within about 45 minutes on the opening day. We ran out of food a few hours later."

"It was awesome," Manning adds. "It was my first big-time race. Even to this day I still get some hero cards and caps and pictures from people to sign of that Team St George car!"

CART as noted though didn't return after its second Rockingham visit. "We weren't willing to pay the fees they were requiring to continue to bring the show to Rockingham," Hands explains. "It didn't make economic sense for us. We had to get very substantial TV revenues to justify paying the fees that they wanted. It was as simple as that." Hands then sold up for a mere £1.

The circuit had its own NASCAR-style series too, initially called ASCAR. And that didn't skimp on the drivers, with none other than Jason Plato leading its impressive line-up. But the category didn't last at Rockingham beyond 2007.

"It was in a time in the early 2000s when the internet was just getting going and streaming channels were just starting to get going," says Manning, who was an ASCAR race winner in 2002. "But TV was still huge at that time and if you weren't on the right channels [you weren't seen]. If it all got started again right now it might be a different story.

"Drivers like myself and Darren Turner and Plato, and [Nicolas] Minassian, were effectively getting paid to be in there, it wasn't sustainable

Photos: Motorsport Images, Jakob Ebrey, Graham Holbon

Track 'weepers' caused head-scratching in 2001

Manning raced in 2002

For most of Rockingham's life racing on the infield circuit layout dominated, such as with the BTCC

ROCKINGHAM'S WIN NUMBER ONE

Here's one for a pub quiz. Who won the first ever race at Rockingham? If your answer's Gil de Ferran, the inaugural CART race victor, then I'm afraid you get zero. The first meeting at the new venue was earlier in 2001, in May, and was a BARC-run club event.

And the first winner? Peter Clark in a Mallock, triumphing in a Clubmans K Sports 1600 race.

The accolade came as a surprise to the man himself, though not for a reason you might assume. "We were the second race," Clark tells Motorsport News. Indeed the honour of christening Rockingham racing was supposed to go to a BMW contest. But they'd made three unsuccessful attempts at getting underway.

"We were standing around watching the carnage and thinking 'blimey what are they going to do next time?'" Clark continues. "And the next time was [the announcement] 'Clubmans K Sports 1600 next race 10 minutes'! So there was a lot of running round!"

Clark won as noted, then he got another surprise in parc ferme. "All these people start waving to stop and [my] first thought was 'what?' Then I think one of the Clubmans Register organisers was going 'it's the first race, it's the first race win', [I thought] 'oh right, OK!' Because as I say we just hadn't had it in our minds at all.

"We don't normally get reporters running up to us, but to have all of these other people with cameras and recording kits running up, [I'm thinking] 'who are you? Who do you think I am? What's going on?'"

And that wasn't the end of the surprises, as even though this first meeting was meant to not have spectators, some had indeed come along to watch and Clark became the target of autograph hunters wanting to mark his place in history. "It certainly made my friends laugh," Clark smiles.

Clark was first to Rockingham flag

Pickups were oval stalwarts

for the guys that were paying the cheques.

"It was great fun but it was competitive, me and Jason and Darren, we had some real good ding-dong battles."

Peter Hardman was the racing circuit's most recent CEO. He got the role via an unusual route. A housing development near the circuit acquired the Rockingham venue to be able to control its noise output. A friend of Hardman's later took over the development and asked Hardman to run the race track while all decided what to do next. Hardman had no cash to play with, but was left to his own devices and could reinvest what he generated.

He got some capital with a rates rebate and reduction, then got more income from renting out venue car parking and office space. Promotion was invested in for the first time in a while, and Rockingham even blazed a trail on circuit social media activity. The track was busy.

Hardman didn't lack ambition either. "I looked at IndyCar [racing at Rockingham]," Hardman tells MN, "I know Zak Brown so I asked Zak to speak to the IndyCar people, the NASCAR people, and he said they're interested but they want $10 million or whatever to come over.

"And it would have required a lot of money to spend on the track because you'd have to put padding all the way round the wall, the investment would have been £2-3m, so it just wouldn't have been viable."

Hardman nevertheless in his time nearly doubled Rockingham's staff and sales, and made a profit in each of his last four years in the role. But he was aware throughout that the end was a matter of time.

"I always knew that it wasn't going to stay as a track, or it was unlikely to, because of the 320-acre site, the land value on the site that big in Corby. The reality is 320 acres is worth a lot of money and the guys who acquired it didn't pay for it, it came with a property deal so they ended up with a piece of land and you just happened to have a track on it.

"You'd have to be making £12m a year to make it a viable running a track on the land value alone. And there's no way that the track [will raise that], even if you got some Goodwood-type events going."

Yet the oval to the end retained its majesty, not least for the Pickups championship that almost alone in later years raced on that layout. "It was an awesome place," Pickups boss Sonny Howard tells MN, "[it would] just take your breath away the second you drove in that gate, just knew what was coming.

"It had everything that we needed. I used to run race control with Nick Breed and it was good, they had staff there that were committed to it as well, you could see everything, everything was right, it was as in America."

But convincing UK-based racers to make the leap to oval racing isn't necessarily easy. Pickup racer Lea Wood, also formerly of the British Touring Car Championship, can attest. "I've got to be honest, I fell into that trap a few years ago because I wasn't very keen for going round the oval," he tells MN. "But then I had a taste for it and got the bug for it and, got to say, of all the racing that I've done including touring car racing it's probably the most exhilarating thing I've ever done.

"We should have focused on the UK"

Guy Hands

Darren Manning won in ASCAR

"The feeling of being on the edge of your seat for so long was just incredible, you're running out 7000 revs for the whole race and the engine doesn't drop below that.

"But it's hard to get people to make the change isn't it? There was a lot of trying but it didn't succeed."

Howard agrees: "Oval racing is a different breed of people, but there is a lot of people out there couldn't understand and the clubs couldn't understand what the racing was about. It was awesome racing. But you had to understand it."

Which appears to be the rub. The Rockingham project was, so to speak, built from the top down rather than from the bottom up, which may have been an error. "It ended up like building a pyramid upside down," Howard adds. "You built it upside down and a kid can push it over. It needed some grounding, and then bit by bit you stepped it up"

And Howard reckons he has a culprit in the Rockingham layout. "It was too big for the UK," he says. "A mile-and-a-half is too big. If they'd have built [a] short oval then the place would still be going.

"The vision was there in the first place, it got lost in transit somewhere along the line. I say if they'd have made that into three-quarters of a mile or a mile circuit then you would have converted the public from short ovals. And you could have floodlit that; oval racing at its best is at night under lights.

"There are people out there that are still spending a lot of money on short ovals, and if they'd have built just one perfect track… It was so close, all of the drawings were already done.

"There should have been enough product so that it was on the oval all of the time. If it had been a bit shorter then you'd got things like Legends would be able to go round there, there was all sorts who could have raced there."

Hands doesn't entirely agree, but his thread of thinking is similar. "It really wasn't a question of having a smaller venue, we needed to have smaller ambitions," he says. "We were aiming vastly too aggressively initially and trying to be successful immediately internationally.

"We should have had more moderate objectives, focused on the UK market first and built the track and seating arrangements for a local venue. We were trying to build the fastest and best track in the world and we would have done much better to have focused on providing something more suitable initially for the UK market.

"We got the business plan completely wrong; We should have focused on making it a venue for British motorsports fans. We were instead overly ambitious, aiming internationally and failing to aim sufficiently at the local audience.

"With the benefit of hindsight, we would have done a great deal differently and today I would have a site worth hundreds of millions as opposed to the £1 note I got for it." ■

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FEATURE

ACCELERATING THE PATH TO BRITISH TOURING CAR CHAMPIONSHIP SUCCESS WITH EXCELR8 MOTORSPORT

BTCC team has a refined Hyundai and Tom Ingram for its 2021 tin-top attack. By Matt James

Excelr8 is set to step up a gear in 2021

When news emerged that Tom Ingram was leaving Speedworks Motorsport after a seven-year relationship in the British Touring Car Championship, it sent shockwaves throughout the paddock.

One of myriad questions thrown up by that conscious uncoupling was: where would the two-time Independents Trophy winner go next? The answer was Excelr8 Motorsport, which is a decision that might have surprised a few. Excelr8 is entering its third year at the top level and its second with a brand new car. The presentation and commitment of the squad is not in question, but the results have yet to flood in with the Hyundai i30 Fastback N.

The team, which has a background in operating cars in the Mini Challenge UK and being a title winner in that class, had taken the brave step into the BTCC in 2019 with a brace of ageing MG6 GTs for Sam Osborne and Rob Smith.

Last year, it rolled out two new i30 Ns for Senna Proctor and Chris Smiley against a very tough backdrop of limited testing in the lockdown shadow and a highly compact 27-race schedule. And yet, despite all that was thrown at the squad, it was rewarded with seventh in the teams' points and produced some real head-turning performances. They included a podium apiece for both drivers.

For Ingram, it was those glimpses of potential – plus a favourable commercial package – that meant Excelr8, headed by husband and wife Antony and Justina Williams, won his signature in very short order.

Ingram explains his choice: "When it came down to it, it was a very easy decision because I am in the BTCC for two reasons: commercially is one, and I also want to win.

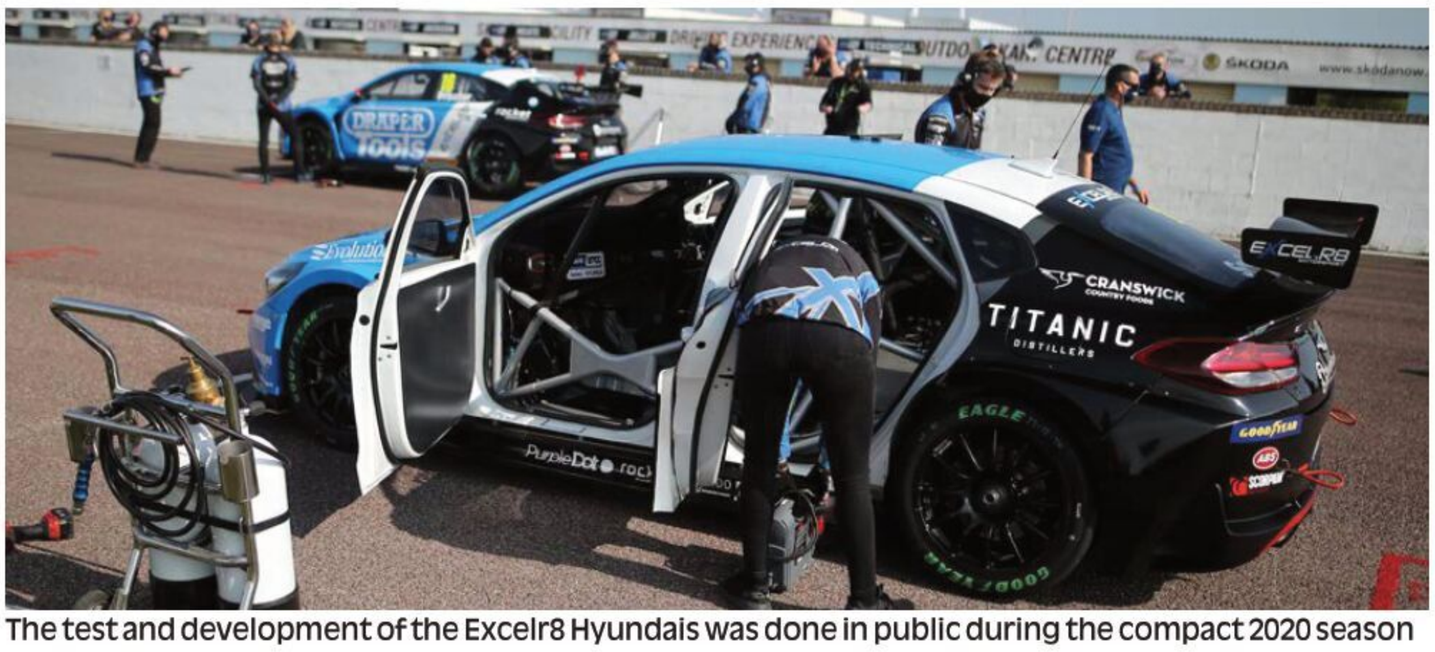
"Looking at the commercial side of it, Excelr8 has a package in place with all of its backers and it does a very good job with sponsors. Also, when I had the conversation, I was able to run it in the way I wanted to run it. I have got the branding and I can bring my backers with me. I can do it the way I wanted without there being problems. They were very much bending over to help me, which was nice to work with.

"And then the other side of it: when the Hyundai came out last year, you could see that Excelr8 had done a really good job with it. The team was slick and everything looked smart. It all fitted, and they didn't make themselves look like fools. It got a podium on its first weekend with a new car.

"You can tell things when you look at a team, even from the outside: you can see those who are going about it in the wrong way and those who are doing a good job, and Excelr8 was doing a good job. Now it just needs a little bit of direction for 2021.

"They have had their first year, the 'free' year if you like of learning the car, so now it

Photos: Momentum Social, Jakob Ebrey



The test and development of the Excelr8 Hyundais was done in public during the compact 2020 season

Podium breakthrough came in the first 2020 meeting at Donington

is a question of steering it in the direction it needs to go and make it a quick little race car. It is a great shape and wheelbase, and there is no reason why this can't be a mega package all around."

The progress of the team has been remarkable. Justina Williams says that her and Antony's dream to join the BTCC grid had been a 10-year long one. While the ambition was there, it wasn't until the pair sold their financial planning business in July 2018 that they had the wherewithal to make the jump.

Joining the grid in 2019 with the ex-Triple Eight Racing and AmDTuning.com MGs might have seemed like folly. They were the oldest chassis on the grid and were hardly likely to rip up any trees on track, but it was all part of a bigger plan and the step up to the BTCC was vital.

Justina Williams explains: "One of the reasons we made the step up was that we knew how much our team – our staff – wanted it as well. We felt that if we didn't do something, we could lose a number of really good members of the team that we didn't want to lose because they had ambitions to move up. In a way, it was a little bit selfish in that respect but the whole thing just felt right."

And the MGs meant that the pressure would be off. The rookie team co-opted former TechSpeed boss and Eurotech team manager Marvin Humphries into the fold to add some experience, but it was mostly a team made up of total newcomers – including the drivers Smith and Osborne.

"The reason we bought the MGs was because it was the only cars available that would give us the TBLs [TOCA BTCC Licence, which every entrant needs to compete]," explains Williams. "It gave us a year where the team could learn – the cars, the championship and how the team could operate at that level. It wasn't ideal but it was the only option and we had to go for it."

The learning was done in 2019, and the team became familiar with the nuances of running in the tin-top series. But the ambitions didn't stop there. After a six-month study working with ace designer and engineer Kevin Berry, one of the most respected men in the pitlane, who has worked with Triple Eight, BMR Racing and WSR previously, Excelr8 decided that the Hyundai would be the perfect base model to take the fight to the Hondas and BMWs. Still, building up a brand new car rather than buying an off-the-peg product from another team was a huge move for a team which was still essentially taking its fledgling steps.

Excelr8 boss Justina Williams

Williams adds: "We could have bought a car that someone else had built and was on the market, but there would have been nothing different about that. There is no big story, there is no big new challenge or chapter for us. It would have been boring, and Antony and I felt like that wasn't something we wanted to do."

The new Hyundai set top-six pace at the maiden group test of 2020 at Silverstone's media day in March, but then the year ground to a halt amid the lockdown dramas. For a squad that was desperate to get miles under its belt and understand its new toy, that was a hammer blow.

"Not being able to test was hard and everything was dramatically different from that point because we couldn't do what we wanted to do ahead of the season," explains Williams. "Effectively, we ended up going to race meetings and doing our testing in public. We just hadn't had the opportunity, and it is in those moments you realise you have so much to do and so little time. It was tough on the team but they just got on with it – everyone just did their best and continued to learn."

That strong performance in the pre-season test translated into immediate results. Smiley turned the car into a podium finisher in the reversed-grid race on its maiden race weekend at Donington Park in August to underline both the work of the team and the latent performance in the hatchback.

Smiley was delighted with the initial performance and the challenge that he was presented with in developing the front-wheel-drive machine. He went on to finish in 14th spot in the standings overall after the 27-race campaign and enjoyed the development role he found himself in last term.

Smiley, who has signed up again for 2021, says: "The whole programme lit my fire. I was right in the middle of the technical side with the set-ups and all that kind of thing from the off. That was from day one, and we are working really hard on that still.

"It was fast straight out of the box last year, but there were some factors which made it very very hard for us. At Donington we were in the headlines, and that was nice, but most of the other weekends we were there knocking hard on the door."

As well as the prospect of a new machine under him, there were other aspects that made Smiley's life tougher than in previous campaigns. He explains: "One of those issues last year was the time of year we were racing in [due to the revamped calendar, which started in August and finished in November], because the calendar had been delayed.

"We were at Snetterton in October, for example. Any set-up that I'd had before and I knew worked, it was very difficult to them translate that into different temperatures. The whole championship is so close, you only have to be a little bit out of the window for things not to work properly."

The Carrickfergus man and the team have now had a few months to refine the set-up and work on any areas that he knows will improve the hardware. "There were a few key areas that kept cropping up in terms of set-up throughout the 2020 campaign. Those were areas we struggled in, and those are the areas we are going to work on," says Smiley "It is [in] the handling. The car is as good as any other car out there, but it is a question of getting everything in line to make sure it all works like it should.

"If you are a little bit out of the window to the left or right with your car, you struggle because underneath, technically, all of the cars are very close. It is all about extracting the most out of what you have."

And that will be the objective for 2021, but arguably the spotlight will be turned up to maximum now that Ingram is onboard. The pressure will be ramped up as Excelr8 now has a proven championship challenger.

Williams is unfazed about the extra scrutiny that might come her way. She says: "From our point of view, you *could* see it as pressure but, ultimately, Tom is going to be a huge part of our expected improvements with the car and the set-up.

"If anything, Tom actually inspires us and puts confidence in us and we have consistency with Chris remaining in the line-up too. There is a feeling now that it is going to happen, we are going to be at the front and we will be battling. Tom is so good to work with and he is, ultimately our team leader. He will do whatever it takes on the track, he has got great abilities there and he is brilliant off-track too. He is such an asset to us and the team."

Ingram himself is fired up for the new programme. He will be leading the line in terms of turning the Hyundai into a consistent frontrunner, but that is a process he proved adept at when the Toyota Corolla hit the track in 2019.

"I feel more excited to be able to develop a car again than going into something that might have already been proven," concludes Ingram. "I like that ability to grow [the car] with me and, from a selfish point of view, make it do all the things I want it to do.

"I wouldn't want to go into a team where there had been someone like [four-time BTCC title winner] Colin Turkington, for example, in the drive before and be told that 'Colin always used to do it like this so this is the way we do it'. That is not what I want to do. I want to go in and make it my car. I want to make it as good as I can. My engineer Spencer Aldridge has been there already and he is excited about this: there is no reason we can't be winning straight away." ■

EXCELR8 IN THE BTCC TRACK RECORD

2019 – MG6 GT

Driver: Rob Smith
Races: 29
Finishes: 26
Best finish: 14th
Championship: 31st

Driver: Sam Osborne
Races: 30
Finishes: 22
Best finish: 14th
Championship: 30th

Teams' championship: 19th

2020 – Hyundai i30 N

Driver: Senna Proctor
Races: 26
Finishes: 23
Best finish: 2nd
Championship: 13th

Driver: Chris Smiley
Races: 27
Finishes: 26
Best finish: 2nd
Championship: 14th

Teams' championship: 7th

Excelr8's first steps were taken in 2019 with Smith and Osborne

Chris Smiley will be part of the two-car line-up again for this season

> **"I want to make the car do what I want"**
>
> **Tom Ingram**

Ingram: excited about the future

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FEATURE

Rallying season that never was...

THE RALLYING WE MISSED OUT ON IN 2020

Nearly a year has passed since the last multi-venue championship rally took place. Luke Barry ponders the storylines that could have emerged over the last 12 months

Photos: Jakob Ebrey, Kevin O'Driscoll, Kevin Money, West Coast Photos

A world in which the words 'coronavirus' or 'Covid-19' mean absolutely nothing feels a long way away. But before the devastating virus began to alter our lives potentially forever, the 2020 rallying season was easing into action: and what a season it promised to be!

Unfortunately for those that prefer their motorsport that bit muddier, rallying in the UK – unlike circuit racing or continental rallying even – has struggled to restart again once the nation's first lockdown came to an end and a multi-venue championship rally hasn't taken place since the Malcolm Wilson Rally on March 14.

This has not only been disastrous for the thousands of people employed in the motorsport industry, but robbed onlookers of a scintillating sporting contest. Here, Motorsport News ponders what we could've been talking about in rallying had the 2020 season played out as normal and look ahead to what we might witness in 2021.

A new direction: Thorburn

THORBURN'S FRESH ATTACK ON TARMAC

Euan Thorburn was the talk of the 2019 rallying season as he swept to a historic title double.

Plenty of drivers have won both the Scottish and the BTRDA Gold Star crown in the past; indeed, Thorburn is one of them. But nobody had ever won both series in the same season before Thorburn and co-driver Paul Beaton swept all before them in their Ford Focus WRC05 last year. In pursuit of a new challenge, Thorburn's Focus was to be fitted with bigger brakes, stiffer springs and hunkered down for the UK's Tarmac stages as the Scotsman switched his focus from the forests to an Asphalt championship assault.

A pre-season warm-up on the Mayo Stages didn't go to plan as he retired, but Thorburn's strong form on the Jim Clark Rally in the past proves he should have been there or thereabouts. But could he have dominated like he had the forest rallies? Like the Scottish championship, it's unclear if that particular mystery will be resolved in 2021 or '22.

Title triple was the aim for Edwards

EDWARDS' ATTEMPT AT HISTORY

The 2020 British Rally Championship season had attracted an entry arguably even more mouth-watering than it had when it resurfaced in 2016.

Crucially this time, the champion elect wasn't so obvious. Challenges came from all corners with Tom Cave, Osian Pryce, Rhys Yates and Ollie Mellors all fancying a crack at reigning champ Matt Edwards. The season-opening Cambrian Rally lived up to the hype, as 3.3 seconds split the top four after the first stage.

Edwards, on his first rally with M-Sport's Ford Fiesta Rally2, had enough in his pocket to win his home event, aided when Cave smacked a log with his Hyundai on the third test. Pryce was second, Yates third, Mellors fourth with youngster James Williams a strong fifth. Josh McErlean, another R5 graduate, was as high as third before he retired too so it all pointed to a competitive season. Advantage Edwards then, but there was no guarantee it would stay like that.

Pryce was switching to a Polo R5, Yates was racking up the miles in the WRC and Cave's prowess was proven in 2019. It promised to be a classic title fight, and had Edwards gone on to secure title triple, he would've been the first driver to win three BRC titles on the bounce. Sadly now, 2020 will simply be forgotten as a mere footnote in series history. Provisionally, the next chapter of the BRC history book is to be written in the summer and it can't come soon enough.

Fisher finally broke his winning duck

FISHER'S LONG-AWAITED SUCCESS

Ever since Alastair Fisher realigned his focus to his native Irish Tarmac Championship back in 2016, he's been a consistent title challenger.

Five years ago, he was in prime position to do it before an accident on Cork 20 paved Keith Cronin's path clear. The following year he would again win several Irish Tarmac rounds but couldn't pip Sam Moffett to the crown. Coming back from a year on the sidelines in 2019, Craig Breen's presence proved insurmountable so Fisher was again resigned to second in his Ford Fiesta R5.

And amazingly in all that time, despite a plethora of Tarmac championship wins, Fisher had yet to win an international rally outright in Ireland. That all changed with a superb victory on the Galway International last February on his first outing with a Volkswagen Polo GTI R5. Sam and Josh Moffett, Donagh Kelly and Meirion Evans all challenged, but Fisher soared. Could it have become a title-winning season for Fisher, replicating uncle Bertie who won four Tarmac championships? We were all robbed of the chance to see what happened, but it would have taken a brave man to bet against it. Fisher was to sample M-Sport's Ford Fiesta Rally2 in West Cork, so perhaps just how dialled the latest Cumbrian machine is to the Irish terrain would have provided the answer. With the ITRC canned for 2021, it'll be another 12 months before we find out.

Petch had won two from two in 2020

SPEED vs CONSISTENCY

Stephen Petch's early 2019 BTRDA Gold Star form was atrocious. A crash and a mechanical woe on the opening two BTRDA rounds ruined his season before it had really begun.

Fast forward the clock to 2020, and exactly the opposite was true: two wins from two – his first rally wins since his title-winning 2017 season – had propelled him into the box seat. That was until Covid-19 hit. While the BTRDA was fortunate to squeeze two rounds of its season in, that ultimately proved irrelevant and potentially more agonising for Petch. The last five rounds would have been intriguing, with a new guard chasing Petch down. George Lepley's Mitsubishi Lancer E10, Russ Thompson's E9 and Ian Bainbridge and Dylan Davies' Skoda Fabia R5s were all in the mix and poised to erode Petch's points lead.

Whether Petch could've held on will be one of life's unknowns. He should get a chance to re-establish his authority this year with championship organisers currently reworking the calendar in the hope of running a full 2021 season.

Binnie burst onto the scene with win

A CHANGING OF THE GUARD

The only Scottish Rally champion of the past decade that started the 2020 season in contention was 2015 and '16 champ Jock Armstrong.

There was no David Bogie, Euan Thorburn, Andrew Gallacher or even recent challenger Garry Pearson on the Snowman Rally entry list. Instead, it was up to a new guard to muscle its way to the front. Enter stage right, Michael Binnie. It looked for all the world that Armstrong would win round one, but a stonking time on the final stage gave Binnie his first SRC win that everybody knew his talent was worthy of. Quite how the rest of the season would have played out is anybody's guess. Freddie Milne's pace in his Ford Fiesta R5 was strong, as was Scott Beattie's in his Mitsubishi. Could either of them or Hyundai i20 R5 pilot John Wink have upset the apple cart? The script was ready until Covid-19 tore it up.

The 2021 season is currently a question mark, but definitely won't begin earlier than June's Argyll Rally.

THE CONTINUAL CLOSED-ROAD REVOLUTION

The change in the law allowing organisers to suspend the Road Traffic Act as opposed to devising a completely new act of legislation to run closed-road rallies may have occurred close-to-four years ago now, but 2020 was to be a big year for this style of event.

The first rally to make use of this change, Tendring & Clacton, was included in the British championship's schedule; the Scottish series had become mixed-surface with Argyll switching from forest to closed-roads, Wales' first closed-road event Rali Bae Ceredigion was to return bigger and better and the Hertfordshire Stages and Coast2Coast Rally were two brand-new events that were poised to run too.

Even the Jim Clark Rally – previously the only closed-road event on the UK mainland – was to return to full strength too in its usual May date after a one-off return in November 2019. Despite all of this being delayed, the virus-riddled 2020 is unlikely to stall the momentum with closed-road rallies which are increasingly looking like the future.

Closed-road events are ever-growing

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COLUMNIST

LUKE BARRY

How do you think British rallying needs to change?

Photos: Jakob Ebrey, FIA ERC, Paul Lawrence

Gone: British importers

European competitors are well supported

Three weeks ago on January 21, I sent out a plea. I like to think I'm a fairly diplomatic person but I couldn't stand by and watch British rallying take punch after punch without saying my piece. As well as laying out where I thought we could improve as a sport, I invited everyone to send in their thoughts about how to reverse the seemingly continuous decline of UK rallying. And a lot of readers came back with some interesting ideas.

For that, I want to thank you. I was humbled to see some of you take the time to respond and offer your thoughts on what is, if we're honest, quite a difficult topic to address. Not only is it hard to admit when things aren't going swimmingly, it can be even harder to pinpoint the solutions and that's most certainly the case here. However by having this discussion, we can all hopefully lay out the right stepping stones to revive life into British rallying for the next generation.

One common bugbear among the community however is the Ford Escort Mk2 love affair. We've all seen and heard the jokes and jibes about the number of these cars that are out on our stages – and it's hard to argue against that. Of course, there is an enormous charm to a proper Mk2 being pedalled hard but that shine is lost when it's so common. But, more pertinently, it's a worrying precedent when quite probably the most popular rally car in this country is over 40 years old.

As somebody incredibly well placed put it to me recently: "We've done the most UK thing possible and thought we're better than the rest, and we're not." It's easy to see how that's happened if you look back to the start of the century and consider the vast number of UK importers invested in the domestic rallying scene. But it's telling when you look at series in France, Spain, Italy and Belgium – to name just a few – and you notice that plenty of the Rally2 entries have support from the local importers. We don't see that in Britain anymore.

One competitor emailed me and said: "British rallying has created its own problem by allowing home-brew specials. There is no chance of attracting any manufacturer/importer interest in UK rallying when it's possible to win in a 40-year-old car. Ford Escorts should not be a competitive option in modern rallying; I believe there is a place for these in historic rallying.

"With the new rally Rally1, Rally2, Rally3, Rally4 and Rally5 categories there is a structure for technical regulation. There should be a place for older (more affordable) cars in national rallying but these should have been previously homologated and run to that homologation. By running the modern categories you also have a much more level playing field in terms of competition and it's not about who has the most expensive kit. Level the playing field and actually see who has the talent."

The Escort is seen as a problem child by some

An organiser also sent in their thoughts and was slightly more scathing, saying some "have no interest in the greater good of the sport, only in their own small part of it" before pointing to a wider problem. "I cannot possibly see any improvement while such people are the majority in the sport and have access to social media. The nastiness associated with anything to do with the BRC is quite embarrassing," they said. Their other points included allowing closed-road events to be the future and forests rallies to slowly perish and finding a solution to run fewer rallies but with a paid organising team as opposed to volunteers.

Motorsport UK CEO Hugh Chambers has also recently expressed his thoughts in Motorsport UK's magazine Revolution. Chambers wrote: Realistically domestic rallying is really a driver/co-driver funded activity and as such we need to get the costs down and the accessibility up. The events that are massively oversubscribed are things like the Roger Albert Clark, the Mull Rally and even the single-venue rallies at race circuits. These latter events may not all be the traditionalists' idea of a rally, but the market responds in saying they like these events – and we need to learn from that. We love forest stage rallying – but we cannot stick our heads in the sand and assume that everything can simply continue in the way it has done for years."

It's all good food for thought, but could potentially be more than that. Motorsport UK has committed to drawing together "a group of people from the spectrum of stakeholders who can bring expert skills to the table, and a fresh set of ideas on how rallying in the UK can be reinvented for the new age." Well done to them. And as I said in last month's column, I'm happy to help wherever I can.

"British rallying has, to a large extent, created its own problem"

WHAT'S ON

YOUTUBE

The impossible dream: Rockingham

In this week's MN we explore the tale of the circuit that opened 20 years ago this year, and realised what seemed a pipedream. Top-level American single-seater racing came to the UK, and on an oval, at Rockingham. And you can watch the entire debut CART race from 2001 on YouTube.

The event had a tough beginning, being shortly after the 9/11 attacks and Alex Zanardi's harrowing Lausitzring accident. Also previous heavy rain created 'weepers', where water seeped through the track's surface. This scratched most of the pre-race running. But, as tends to be motorsport's way, the race – albeit a truncated one – went on. And a fine race it was too.

It was one for the points leaders Gil de Ferran and Kenny Brack; their battle first simmered then had a thrilling crescendo. The aggressive Champ Cars and their screeching 2.65-litre engines, that needed barely a lift through the rapid 1.5-mile speedway, appealed to the senses by themselves. We also discover on the coverage Zanardi's unbelievable, yet typical, reaction to his Lausitzring calamity.

You can watch it all at: youtube.com/watch?v=nJGJzerKAow or you can search: 'CART 2001 – ROCKINGHAM – ROUND 16'.

If, though, you are one more inclined towards Rockingham's road-course version YouTube has plenty of action from there too, particularly from the British Touring Car Championship. The infield layout is far removed from the oval, but it ensured action, not least via lunges for position at the tight hairpin concluding the long banked blast by the pits.

There are highlights round-ups from a number of the BTCC's Rockingham stop-offs, and look out for friend of MN Rob Austin claiming his second BTCC win there in 2014, and Tom Ingram taking his maiden podium in 2015 after a battle with Jason Plato that Ingram recounted to MN recently as one of his BTCC career high points.

The 2014 highlights are at: youtube.com/watch?v=0UHHMCZ3Sig, or via searching 'BTCC 2014 | ROCKINGHAM HIGHLIGHTS', while 2015's are at: youtube.com/watch?v=fNne44hC4YY or via 'ROCKINGHAM HIGHLIGHTS | BTCC 2015'. If all that fails to amuse, you can look at a guaranteed source of mirth when BTCC's odd couple, Plato and Matt Neal, had a tete-a-tete in the pitlane in 2011.

That is at: youtube.com/watch?v=VAk0MI4E8UA or from a search for: 'Matt Neal v Jason Plato fight at Rockingham'.

Graham Keilloh

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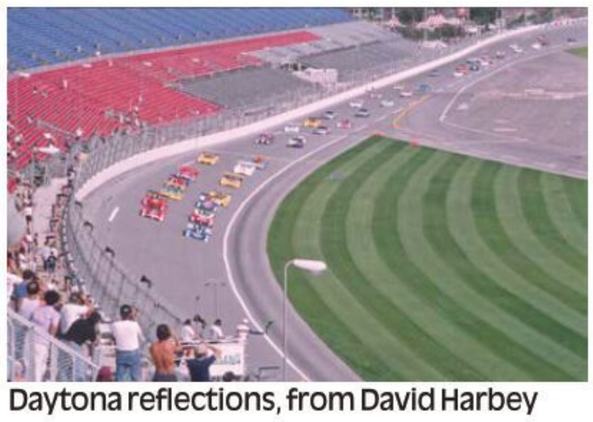
ART EDITOR MIKE STOKOE'S FAVOURITE OF THE WEEK!

The very best of British, from Rich Cranston: A Morgan and a TVR battle at Donington Park

James Lomax snapped Patrick Watts' 406

Pushing hard in a Fiat 131, from Chris Noble



Daytona reflections, from David Harbey

More classic action from James Lomax

Patrick Watts (r) charging, by David Harbey

Classic Lotus at a classic venue: Robert Taylor's shot from the Goodwood Festival of Speed

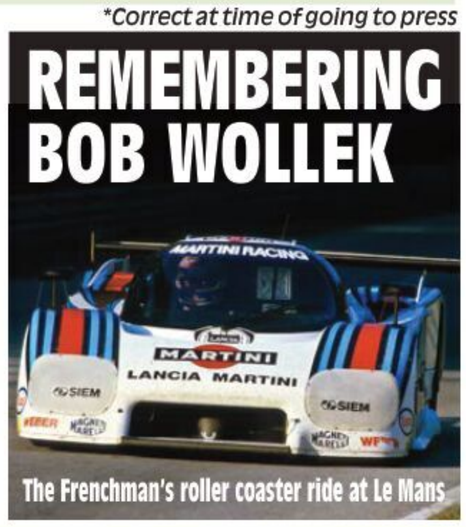
NEXT WEEK OUT THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 25 2021

*Correct at time of going to press

READERS' Q&A: PHIL KEEN

British GT speed king answers the MN readers' questions

REMEMBERING BOB WOLLEK



The Frenchman's roller coaster ride at Le Mans

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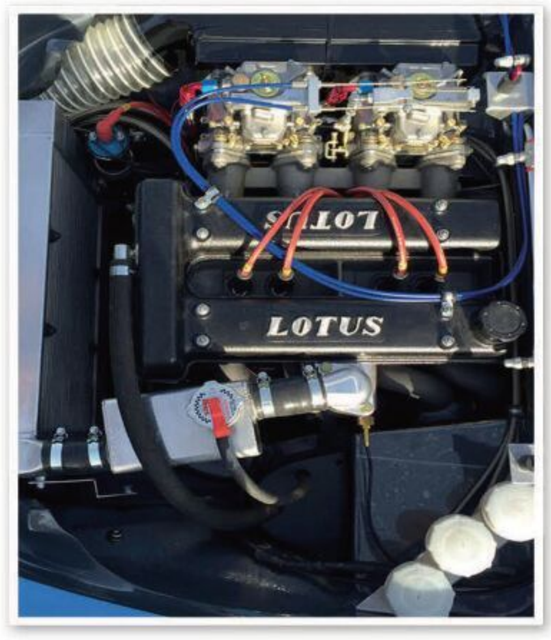

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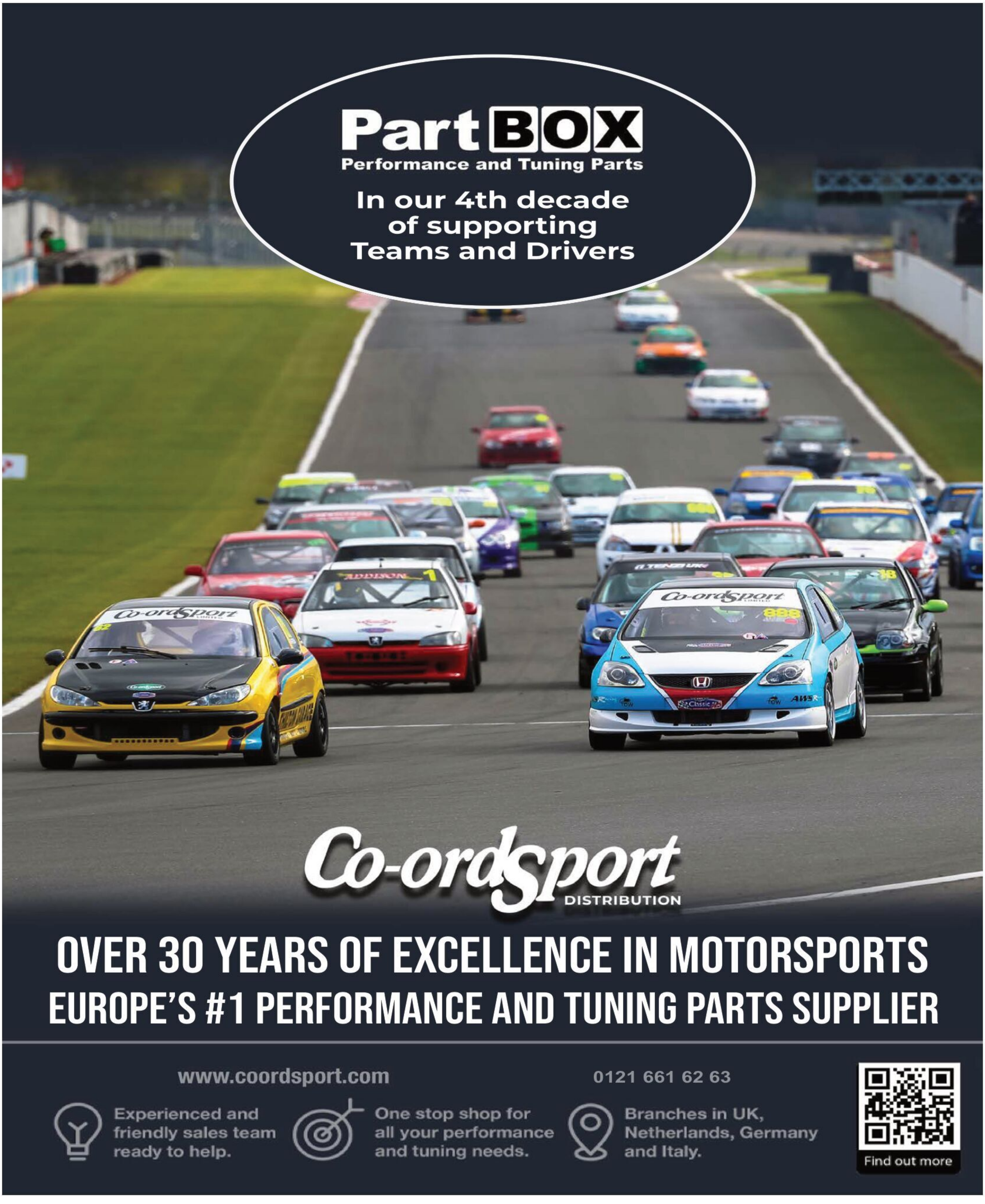
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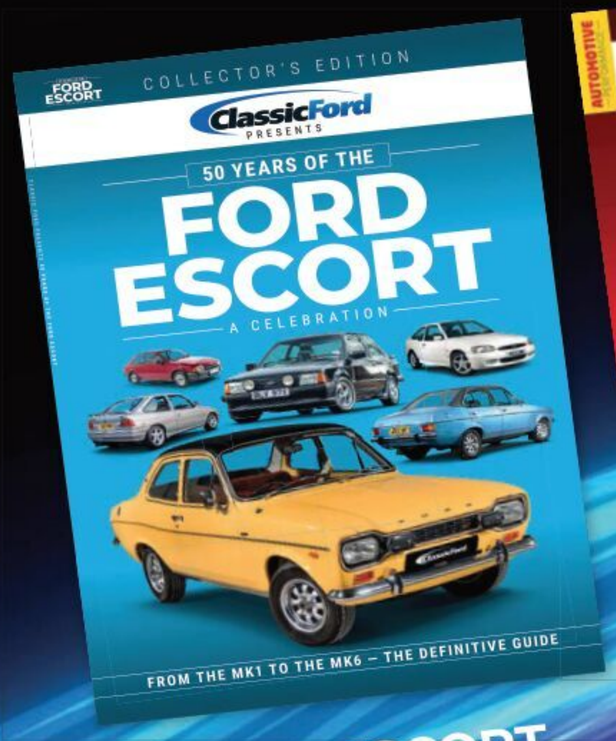

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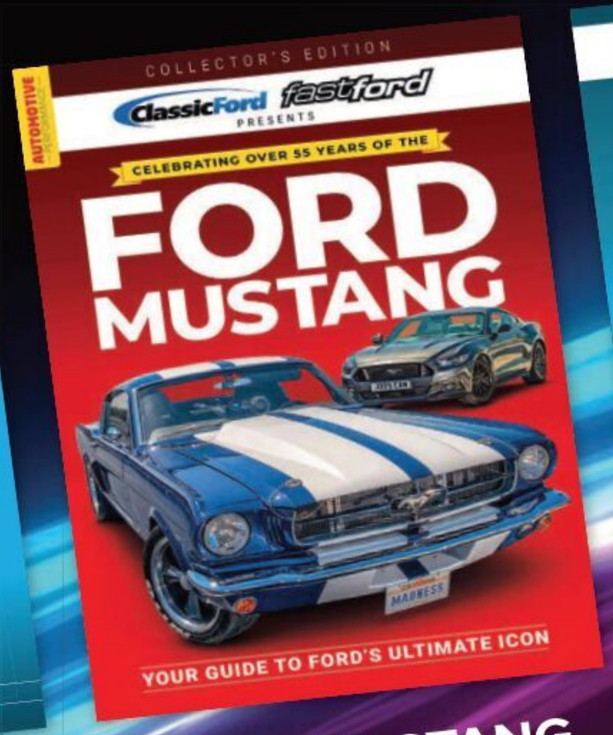

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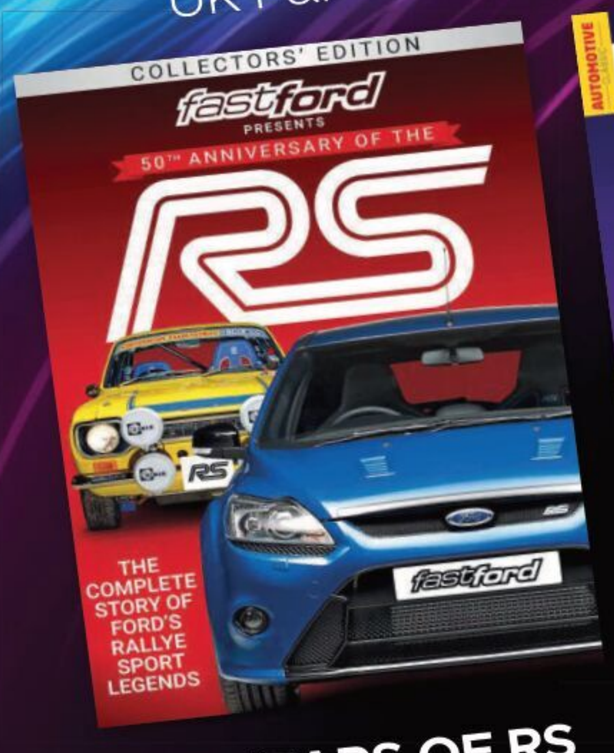

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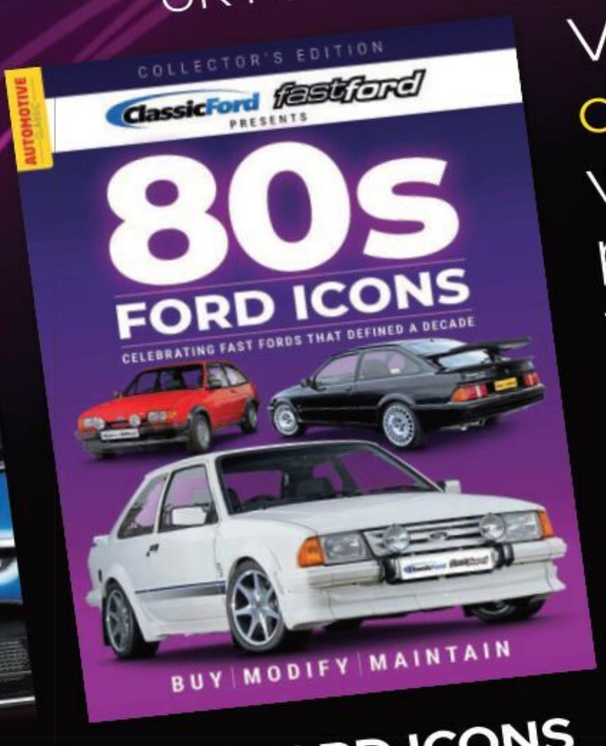

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